

THE
POACHER'S
WIFE
BY
EDEN
PHILLPOTTS



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THE POACHER'S WIFE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

LYING PROPHETS
CHILDREN OF THE MIST
SONS OF THE MORNING
THE STRIKING HOURS
THE RIVER
THE AMERICAN PRISONER
THE SECRET WOMAN
KNOCK AT A VENTURE
THE PORTREEVE

THE HUMAN BOY
FANCY FREE

MY DEVON YEAR
UP ALONG AND DOWN ALONG

THE POACHER'S WIFE

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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THE POACHER'S WIFE

CHAPTER I

AT THE "WHITE HART"

THE bar of the "White Hart," Moreton-hampstead, was full, and, in the atmosphere of smoke and beer, a buzz of sound went up from many throats.

In one corner, round a table, men sat and laughed, but the object of their amusement did not share the fun. He was a powerful, bull-necked man with a clean-shorn face, grey whiskers, and dark eyes that shone brightly under pent-house brows, bushy and streaked with grey.

Mr Matthew Sweetland heard the chaff of his companions and looked grim. He was head gamekeeper at Middlecott Court, and no man had a worthier reputation. From his master to his subordinates, all spoke well of him. His life prospered; his autumn "tips" were a splendid secret known only to himself and his wife. He looked forward presently to retiring from the severe business of a game-

keeper and spending the end of life in peace. One thorn alone pricked Matthew; and from that there was no escape. His only son, Daniel Sweetland, had disappointed him. The keeper's wife strove to make her husband more sanguine; neighbours all foretold pleasant things concerning Daniel; but the lad's reputation was not good. His knowledge of sport and his passion for sport had taken a sinister turn. They were spiced with a love of adventure and very vague ideas on the law of property. Flogging had not eradicated these instincts. When the time came to make choice of a trade, Daniel decided against gamekeeping.

"I be too fond of sport," he said.

And now he worked at Vitifer Mine on Dartmoor, and was known to be the cleverest poacher in the district.

On coming of age, the youth made his position clear to his parents.

"I don't think the same as you, father, because I've larned my lessons at the Board School, an' ideas be larger now than they was in your time. I must have my bit o' sport; an' when they catches me, 'twill be time enough to pull a long face about it. But this I'll promise on my oath; that never do I set foot inside Middlecott woods, an' never will I help any man as does. I'll not lift a gun against

any bird of your raising ; but more I won't say. As to game in general—well, I've got my opinions ; an' being a Radical with large ideas about such things, I'll go my way."

"Go your way to the gallows," said Matthew Sweetland. "If I'd knowed what I was breeding you for, I'd have sent you to your uncle the cobbler to London, an' never taught you one end of a gun from t'other. 'Tis poor payment for a good father's care to find his only one be an ungrateful toad of a boy, an' a disgrace to the nation."

"Sporting will out," answered Daniel, calmly. "I ban't a bad sort ; an' I'll disgrace nobody. I'm a honest, plain dealer—according to my own lights ; an' if I don't agree with you about the rights of property in wild things like birds an' fish, an' a hare now an' again—well, what of it?"

"'Tis the beginning," declared his father. "From the day I caught you setting a wire in a hedge unbeknownst to me, I felt that I'd done wrong to let you bide in the country."

And now Matthew Sweetland's beer tasted sour as he heard the talk of his neighbours in the bar of the "White Hart."

A handsome, fair man was speaking. He looked pale for a country dweller, and indeed his business kept him much within doors ; for

he was a footman at Middlecott Court. His eyes were blue, his face was long, and his features regular. He spoke slowly and with little accent, for he had copied his master's guests carefully and so mended the local peculiarities of his speech.

"'Tis said without doubt, Sweetland, that the burglars must have been helped by somebody—man or maid—who knew the house and grounds. What did Bartley here think when first he heard about it?"

The footman turned to a thin, weak-faced, middle-aged person who sat next to him. Luke Bartley was a policeman, at present off duty, and a recent burglary of valuable plate was the subject they now discussed.

Mr Bartley had a feeble mouth and shifty eye. He avoided the gamekeeper's scowling glance and answered the footman.

"Well, we must judge of folks by their records. I don't say Dan Sweetland's ever been afore the Bench; but that's thanks to his own wicked cleverness. His father may flash his eyes at me; but I will say that taking into account Dan's character an' pluck an' cheek, I ban't going to rule him out of this job. He might have helped to do it very easily. He knows Westcombe so well as anybody, and his young woman was under-housemaid in the

house till a week afore the burglary. Well, I won't say no more. Only 'tis my business as a police constable to put two and two together ; which I shall do, by the help of God, until I be promoted. Besides, where was Daniel that night ? ”

“ He was fishing on the Moor,” said another man—a young and humble admirer of Daniel Sweetland.

“ So he may have told you ; but what's his word worth ? ”

Then the youth, who was called Prowse, spoke again and turned to the footman.

“ Anyway, it ban't a very seemly thing of you, Titus Sim, to say a word against Dan ; for 'tis well known that you was after Minnie Marshall yourself.”

Titus Sim grew paler than usual and turned roughly on the youngster.

“ What fool is this ! And impertinent with it ! You ought to go back to school, Samuel Prowse. 'Tisn't right that you should talk and drink with grown men, for you're too young to see a joke apparently. D'you think I don't know Daniel better than you ? D'you think I'd breathe a word against him—the best friend I've got in the world ? Of course he had no hand in the burglary at Westcombe. If I thought he had—but it's a mad idea. He's

got his own sense of honour, and a straighter man don't walk this earth. As to Miss Marshall—she liked him better than she liked me; and there's an end of that."

"I'm sorry I spoke, then," said Dan's young champion. "I beg your pardon, Titus Sim."

"Granted—granted. Only remember this: I'm Dan's first friend, and best and truest friend, and he's mine. We'm closer than brothers, him and me; and if I make a joke against him now and then, to score against Bartley here, it's friendship's right. But I'll not let any other man do it."

The policeman nodded.

"There was the three of you," he said. "Dan, an' you, an' Sir Reginald's son, Mr Henry. When you were all boys, 'twas a saying in Moreton that one was never seed without t'others. But rare rascals all three in them days! You've made my legs tired a many times, chasing of 'e out of the orchards."

"Such friendships ought to last for ever," declared Titus, thoughtfully. "Mister Henry's a good friend to me yet. When I got weakly about the breathing, 'twas him that made Sir Reginald take me on indoors. Though you'll witness, Sweetland, that I'd have made a good enough gamekeeper."

The grey man nodded.

"You was larning fast," he admitted.

"But not so fast as Daniel. He took to it like a duckling to water—in his blood, of course."

"An' be Mr Henry his friend still?" asked the policeman.

Titus Sim hesitated.

"Mr Henry's like his father—a stickler for old ways and a pillar of the nation. He got his larning at Eton—'tis different from what Dan got at the Board School. He hears these rumours about poaching, and he's an awful hard young man—harder than his father; because there's nobody in the world judges so hard as them that never have been tempted. No, to be frank, Mr Henry ain't so favourable to Daniel as he used to be."

"Well, well," said Bartley; "if 'tis proved as Dan had no hand in the burglary at Westcombe, I, for one, shall be thankful, an' hope to see him a credit to his father yet. But that's a very serious job, I warn 'e. Near five thousand pounds of plate gone, as clean as if it had all been melted and poured into a bog. Not a trace. An' the house nearly eight mile by road from the nearest station."

"They think the thieves had a motor-car," said the youngest of the party, Daniel's admirer, the lad Prowse. "'Twas your son himself, Mr Sweetland, who thought of that; for I

heard him tell the inspector so last week at the Warren Inn ; an' the inspector—Mr Gregory, I mean—slapped his leg an' said 'twas the likeliest thing he'd heard."

They talked at length and the glasses were filled again.

"As to Dan," summed up Mr Bartley, "come a few weeks more an' he'll be married. There's nought like marriage for pulling a man together ; an' she'm a very nice maiden by all accounts. Ban't I right, gamekeeper ?"

"You are," answered Sweetland. "Though I say it, Minnie Marshall's too good for my son. I never met a girl made of properer stuff—so quiet and thoughtful. Many ladies I've seen in the sporting field weren't a patch on her for sense an' dignity. God He knows what she seed in Daniel. I should have thought that Sim here, with his nice speech, an' pale face, an' indoor manners, was much more like to suit her."

Under the table Titus Sim clenched his hands until the knuckles grew white. But on his face was a resigned smile.

"Thank you for that word, Sweetland. 'Twas a knock-down blow ; but, of course, my only wish is her happiness now. I pray and hope that Dan will make a good husband for her."

"She've got a power over him as I never thought no female could get over Dan," said Prowse.

"That's because you'm a green boy an' don't know what the power of the female be yet," answered Bartley. "There he is!" he added. "He'm sitting in the trap outside, an' Mr Henry's speaking to him."

Sweetland and the rest turned their eyes to the window.

"He's borrowed the trap from Butcher Smart," said Daniel's father. "He's going to drive Minnie out to the Warren Inn on Dartmoor this evening. There's a cottage there, within two miles of Vitifer Mine; an' if she likes it, he's going to take her there to dwell after they'm married."

At the door of the White Hart stood a horse and trap. A young woman held the reins and beside the vehicle two men talked and walked up and down. The threads of their lives were closely interwoven, though neither guessed it. Birth, education, position separated them widely; it had seemed improbable that circumstance could bring them more nearly together; but chance willed otherwise, and time was to see the friendship of their boyhood followed by strange and terrible tests and hazards involving the lives of both.

Young Henry Vivian had just come down from Oxford. His career was represented by a first-class in Classics and a "Blue" for Rugby football. He thought well of himself and had a right to do so. He had imbibed the old-fashioned, crusted opinions of his race, and his own genius and inclinations echoed them. He was honourable, upright and proud. He recognised his duty to his ancestors and to those who should follow him. Time had not tried him and, lacking any gift of imagination, he was powerless to put himself in the place of those who might have stronger passions, greater temptations and fewer advantages than himself. Thus his error was to be censorious and uncharitable. Eton had also made him conceited. He was a brown, trim, small-featured man, with pride of race in the turn of his head and haughty mouth. His small moustache was curled up at the ends ; his eyes were quick and hard. He placed his hand on Daniel Sweetland's shoulder as they walked together ; and he had to raise his elbow pretty high, for Dan stood six feet tall, while young Vivian was several inches shorter.

"We're old friends, Daniel, and I owe you more than you'd admit—to shoot straight, and to ride straight too, for that matter. So it's a sorrow to me to hear these bad reports."

"Us don't think alike, your honour," said Daniel. "But for you I'd do all a man might. There's few I'd trouble about; but 'twould be a real bad day for me if I thought as you was angry with me."

"Go straight then — in word and deed. With such a father as Matthew, there's no excuse for you. And such a wife, too. For I'll wager that young woman there will be a godsend, Daniel. My mother tells me that Lady Giffard at Westcombe says she never had a better servant."

Daniel's eyes clouded at a recollection.

"Her ladyship tells true," he said; "and yet there be knaves here and there go about saying that Minnie had a hand in the burglary a fortnight since, and that she helped me to know the ways of the house. I knocked Saul Pratt down in the public street last Wednesday for saying it; an' broke loose two of his front teeth."

"I'd have done the same, for I know that rumour is a lie, Dan; and so does every other man who knows you. By the way, I've got something for you. It will show you that I'm going to forget the poaching stories against you. If you'll come up to-morrow night at nine o'clock and ask for me, I'll tell them to bring you to my study, and we'll have a yarn

about old times. It's a gun I have for you—a real good one—as a wedding present. And well I know you'll never put it to a dishonest use, Daniel."

Young Sweetland grinned and grew hot with pleasure. He was a fine, powerful man, very like his father, but with some magic in his face the parent lacked. Dan's deep jaw was underhung a trifle; his forehead sloped back rather sharply, and his neck was thick and sinewy. Every line of him spoke the fighter, but he was bull-dog in temper as well as build. Good-nature dwelt in his countenance and he never tired of laughing. Strong, natural sense of right and honour marked him. He was clever, observant, and well-educated. Only in the matter of game Dan's attitude puzzled his friends and caused them to mistrust him. Women liked him well, for there was that in his face, and black eyes, and curly hair, that made them his friends. Children loved him better than he loved them. As for his sweetheart, she trusted him and trusted herself to cure Dan's errors very swiftly after they should be married.

"I'm sure I'm terrible obliged to you; an' I'll walk up to-morrow night, if you please; an' every time I pull trigger I'll think kindly of you, Mister Henry, sir. Out by Vitifer,

where I be going to live if my young woman likes it, there's scores of rabbits, and a good few golden plover an' crested plover in winter, not to name scores o' snipe."

"I'll come out occasionally," said Henry Vivian, "and when you can get a day off, you shall show me some sport."

"Sport I warrant you. An' you'll be riding that way to hounds often, no doubt. There'll always be a welcome for 'e an' a drop of drink to my cottage, your honour."

"To-morrow night, then. But don't keep your young woman waiting any longer."

Dan touched his hat and turned to the dog-cart, while his friend nodded and entered the White Hart.

There Henry Vivian found his father and two other Justices of the Peace at their luncheon in a private room. Sir Reginald and his friends were full of the burglary at Westcombe. All knew Lady Giffard, a wealthy widow, and all sympathised with her grave loss. But no theory of the crime seemed plausible, and the police were at fault. The subject was presently dismissed, for August had nearly run its course, and partridges were the theme proper to the time.

"I shall have some fun with them," said

young Vivian ; "but I'm afraid the pheasants won't see much of me this year."

His father explained.

"My son is going to visit our West Indian estates this winter. I want to be rid of them, for though they made my grandfather's fortune before the days of the Emancipation, they've been rather a white elephant to our family for the last half century and more. The returns go from bad to worse. Indeed, there is more in it than meets the eye. But Hal's no dunce at figures, and they'll not hoodwink him out there, even if they attempt it."

CHAPTER II

HANGMAN'S HUT

MINNIE MARSHALL was a quiet, brown girl, with a manner very reserved. Her parents were dead, her years, since the age of sixteen, had been spent in service. Now marriage approached for her and, at twenty, she contemplated without fear or mistrust a husband and a home. Of immediate relations the girl possessed none, save an old aunt at Moreton, who kept a little shop there. Minnie was a beauty and well experienced in the matter of suitors, but Daniel Sweetland's romance ran smooth and she left him not long in doubt. That young Titus Sim had been a better match, most folks declared; and even Daniel, from the strong position of success, often asked Minnie why she had put him before his friend.

Now, as the lad drove his sweetheart to inspect a cottage near his work on Dartmoor, they overtook Mr Sim returning to Middlecott Court.

"Jump up, Titus, an' I'll give 'e a lift to the lodge," said Daniel.

The footman took off his hat very politely to Minnie, then he climbed into the vacant seat at the back of the trap and the party drove forward.

Dan was full of the interview with Henry Vivian, and the two young men both sang the praises of their old companion.

"He's off to foreign parts in a few weeks, but he hopes to be at my wedding," said Dan. "He'd be very sorry not to be there. But he's got to go pretty soon to look after Sir Reginald's business, by all accounts."

"There's been a lot of talk about the sugar estates in the West Indies," explained Sim. "I overhear these things at table. Mr Henry's going out to look into affairs. There's an overseer—the son of Sir Reginald's old overseer. But master doubts whether his figures can be trusted, and whether things are as bad as he says they are. So Mr Henry Vivian is going to run out without any warning. He'll soon have the business ship-shape and find out any crooked dealings—such a clever man as he is."

"Awful strict sure enough," said Dan, with a chuckle. "He'd heard I was a bit of a free-trader in matters of sporting, an' he was short an' sharp, I promise you. However, 'tis only the point of view, an' all owing to me being a Radical in politics. He knows that I'd not do

a dirty trick, else he wouldn't have bought me a new gun for a wedding present. I'll show him some sport on Dartmoor come presently."

Sim changed the subject.

"I hope you'll like your home upalong, Miss Marshall," he said.

Her lips tightened a little ; she turned round and her fearless eyes met the speaker's.

"Thank you, Mr Sim ; and I hope so too."

Her voice was cold and indifferent.

"An' no man will be welcomer there than you, Titus," said Sweetland. "You an' me will have many a good bit of sporting upalong, I hope."

"You'll have something better to do than that, Dan," said Minnie. "Sporting be very well for a bachelor, but work an' wages must be the first thought come a man's got a wife."

"No need to tell me that. I'll work for 'e as hard as a horse ; an' well you know it."

A lodge rose beside them and Daniel pulled up at the main entrance to Middlecott. Noble gates of iron ascended here. Ancient leaden statues ornamented the four posts of this entrance, and one of them, a Diana, had a bullet wound under her left breast. Others among these figures were also peppered with small shot—the folly of bygone sportsmen of the Vivian clan. From the gates a wide avenue of Spanish chestnuts extended, and half

a mile away, rising above the heads of stately conifers, stood Middlecott Court. Behind it, ridge on ridge, billowed the fringes of the Moor. The gate-lodge was Daniel Sweetland's home, and the sound of wheels brought his mother from the door. Mrs Sweetland smiled as she saw Minnie, and came out and kissed her.

"So you'm going up for to see the li'l house, my pretty? I do hope you'll like it. 'Tis small but weather-proof, an' all very nice an' water-sweet."

"I shall like it very well, mother, if Dan likes it," answered the girl.

"Us will be back by eight o'clock or earlier, an' Minnie will stay an' eat a bit with us," declared Daniel.

Then he drove on and left his mother looking after them. Mr Sim had already started upon his way to the Hall.

"Poor old 'Titus,'" said Dan, as he walked by the trap presently to ease the horse at a stiff hill. "However did you come to like me best, Min?"

"Who can tell?"

"I wish, all the same, you thought kinder of him. You'm awful cold to the man."

"He makes me cold. For my part, I wish you didn't like him so well as you do."

Dan grew rather red.

"No man, nor woman neither, will ever stand between me an' Titus Sim," he said.

"You might think 'twas jealousy," she answered quietly, "for you are sun, an' air, an' life to me, Daniel. 'Tis my love quickens my heart. But I'm not jealous. Only I can't pretend to care for him. I've got nought against him save a womanly, nameless dread. An' why it's in my heart I don't know, for I ban't one to mislike folks without a cause."

"Then best to get it out of your heart," he said roughly. "You'm not used to talk nonsense. The man's one in a thousand—kind, honest, gentle, an' as good a shot as there is in the county. Straight as a line, too. Straighter than I be myself, for that matter. He've behaved very game over this, for well I know what it cost him to lose you."

"I wish I felt to respect him like you do. 'Tis wicked not to, yet I be asking myself questions all the time. He'm so rich, they say. How can he be rich, Daniel? Where do the money come from?"

"From the same place as my own father's; from gentlefolks' pockets. The men he waits on make no more of a five pound note than we do of a halfpenny. Titus will die a rich man, and glad am I to think it; for he's been a most unlucky chap in other ways. There was his health

first, as wouldn't let him be a keeper, though he wanted to, and then—you. An' a worthless beggar like me—I can do what I please an' win you. All the same, I don't think no better of you for not thinking better of my best friend."

"I hope you'll never find there was a reason for what I feel, Daniel."

"I swear I never shall; an' I'll thank you to drop it, Minnie. I don't want to think my wife is a fool. Nothing on God's earth shall come between me an' Sim—be sure of that."

The girl's lips tightened again, but she was too wise to answer. In truth she had no just grievance against her sweetheart's friend. Titus had asked her to marry him a week before Daniel put the question; and she had refused him. Two days later with passion he had implored her to reconsider her decision; and when again she answered "No," he had spoken wildly and called Heaven to witness that she should be his wife sooner or later. His white face had flamed red for once, and his smooth, steady voice had broken. But on their next meeting Titus was himself again. He had then begged Minnie's pardon for his temper; and when their little world knew that she was going to take the gamekeeper's son, Mr Sim was the first to give Daniel joy and congratulate Minnie.

She had no definite case against him ; but a deep intuition dominated her mind, and frankly she regretted Daniel's affection for his old rival.

Now, however, she returned silence to her lover's angry words, according to her custom. Soon the climb to the Moor was accomplished, and the cold wind lit Minnie's eyes and calmed her sweetheart. Over the great expanse of autumnal purple and gold they took their way, and now sank into valleys musical with falling water, and now trotted upon great heaths, where sheep ran, ponies galloped, and the red kine roamed. To the horizon rose the granite peaks of the land. Eastward there billowed Hameldon's huge, hogged back, and to the north rolled Cosdon ; but Yes Tor and High Willhayes—the loftiest summits of the Moor—were hidden. Westerly a mighty panorama of hills and stony pinnacles spread in a semi-circle, and the scene was bathed with the clear light that follows rain. The sun began to sink upon his cloud pillows and heaven glowed with infinite brilliance and purity.

“ 'Twill be good to live up here in this sweet air, along with you, dear heart,” said Minnie.

“ Yes, an' it will ; an'—an' I'm sorry I spoke harsh a minute ago, my own dear darling Min,” he cried.

"I forgived 'e afore the words was out of your mouth," she answered.

Whereupon he dropped the reins and hugged her close and nearly upset the trap.

Presently they passed Bennett's Cross, where that mediæval monument stands deep in the heather; then they came to the Warren Inn, perched on lofty ground under Hurston Ridge in the middle of the Moor.

As Daniel drew up, a man came out of the hostelry, walked to the horse's nose and stroked it.

He was almost hairless. His small eyes glittered out of his round countenance like a pig's; his short figure was of amazing corpulence. A smile sat on his fat face, and his voice came in a thin and piping treble, like a bird's.

"Here you be then?"

"Yes, Johnny, here us be. This is Minnie Marshall, who's going to marry me presently. Minnie, this here man is Johnny Beer—beer by name an' barrel by nature! There's not a better chap 'pon the Moor, and him an' his wife will be our only neighbours for three miles round."

Mr Beer beamed and shook Minnie's outstretched hand.

"A bowerly maiden, sure enough," he said frankly. "I hope you'll like the cot, my dear."

'Tis lonesome to a town-bred mind, but very pleasant you will find. And wi' a husband handy, you'll have all you want. An' my missis for your friend, I hope. She'm not a beauty, but she wears something wonderful, an' she've a heart so wide as a church-door, though fretful where the poultry's concerned. Everybody to Postbridge will tell you of her qualities. Of course it ban't my place. But never was a one like she in all the blessed West Countree."

"Bring a pint of liquor an' the key of the cottage, Johnny," said young Sweetland; "an' then after a drink, us'll walk down, an' Minnie can make up her mind."

"There's only one thing against the place, an' that is the name," declared Mr Beer. "Though for my part I don't see why you shouldn't change the name. It can be done without any fuss or documents, I believe. 'Tis called 'Hangman's Hut,' because the first person as lived there killed himself, being tired of having the world against him. With an old peat knife, he took his life. But if I was you, I should just change that an' call it by some pretty name, like 'Moor View Villa,' or what not."

"Never," declared Daniel. "I'm above a small thing like that—so's my girl. 'Hangman's Hut' be a good, grim name—not easy to forget. Shall be left so—eh, Minnie?"

"The name's nought if the place is weather-tight, an' healthy, an' clean. Call it what you please, Daniel."

Sweetland turned triumphantly to the inn-keeper.

"That's the sort she is," he said.

"Ah — strong-minded, without a doubt," admitted Mr Beer. "Wish my Jane was. Wish I was too. 'Tis a very good gift on Dartmoor; but we'm soft in heart as well as body. We live by yielding. I couldn't bide in a place by that name. It's owing to the poetry in me. 'Twill out. I must be rhyming. So sure as there comes a Bank Holiday, or the first snow, or an extra good run with hounds, then verses flow out of me, like feathers off a goose."

The lovers drank a pint of beer between them turn and turn about; but Minnie's share was trifling. Then they walked off to Hangman's Hut, where it stood alone in a dimple of the hillside half a mile from the high road.

The cottage looked east and was approached by a rough track over the moor. High ground shielded it from the prevalent riot of the west wind; and nearly two miles distant, in the midst of a chaos of broken land and hillocks of *débris*, a great waterwheel stood

out from the waste and a chimney rose above Vitifer Mine.

Minnie gravely examined the cottage and directed Daniel where to take measurements. The place was in good repair, and had only been vacant two months. It was not the last tenant who had destroyed himself, but an unhappy water-baliff many years previously.

"The golden plover nearly always come this way when they first arrive in winter. Many's the pretty bird I'll shoot 'e, Min."

She nodded. Her thoughts were on the kitchen range at the time.

"You'll often see hounds in full cry—'tis a noble sight."

But Minnie was examining the larder.

She spent an hour in the cottage, and no experienced housewife could have shown more judgment and care. Then, much to Daniel's satisfaction, his sweetheart decided for Hangman's Hut.

"But I wish you could get it for five shillings a week, instead of six, Dan."

"No, no, I can't beat Beer down. He'm too good a neighbour, an' 'twould never do to begin with a difference of opinion. Six ban't too much. An' I'm to get twenty shillings wages after Christmas. You always forget that. There'll be tons of money."

Mrs Beer greeted them on their return to the Warren Inn. She was a plain, care-worn soul who let her poultry get upon her nerves and take the place of children as a source of anxiety. In her sleep she often cried out about laying hens and foxes; but everybody knew her for the best creature on Dartmoor. The women talked together and the men drank. Then Daniel prepared to start, and soon he and Minnie were jogging home under the dusk of night. Dartmoor stretched vast and formless round about them, and Minnie discussed second-hand furniture. She held that carpets were a luxury not to be named; but Daniel insisted upon one in the parlour.

"For our bedroom," he said, "I've got six jolly fine mats made of skins. One's a badger's, an' one's a foxhound's, an' three be made out of a horse's skin, an' one's that old collie as I used to have. There was a touch of Gordon setter in him; an' a very pretty mat for your little feet he'll make. An' proud he'd be if he knowed it, poor old devil."

"They'll do very nice if the moth don't get in them," said Minnie.

Then, weary of sordid details, Dan let his girl take the whip and reins; and while she drove he cuddled her.

CHAPTER III

GUNS IN THE NIGHT

TIME sped swiftly for the young miner and his sweetheart, and Daniel told his friend Prowse, as a piece of extraordinary information, that he had killed nothing that ran, or swam, or flew, for the space of three weeks. Seeing that these innocent days formed part of the month of September, the greatness of the occasion may be judged. Every moment of the man's leisure was spent at Hangman's Hut ; and once he took a whole holiday and went with Minnie to Plymouth, that he might spend ten pounds on furniture. He also purchased a ready-made suit of grey cloth spotted with yellow, which seemed well adapted for his wedding day. It proved too small in the back, but Daniel insisted on buying it, and Minnie promised to let out the shoulders.

Then came the night before his wedding, and the young man looked round his new home and reflected that he would not enter it again until he came with a wife on his arm. Mrs Beer had proved of precious worth during these preparations, and now all was ready.

Even the little evening meal that would greet Minnie on her arrival had been prepared. A cold tongue, a cold fowl, two big red lettuces from Johnny Beer's garden, cakes, a bottle of pale ale, and other delicacies were laid in. Groceries and stores had been secured; and many small matters destined to surprise and delight the housewife were in their places; for, unknown to Minnie, Daniel had spent five pounds—the gift of his mother—and the money represented numerous useful household contrivances.

It began to grow dusk when young Sweetland's work was done. Then the ruling passion had play with him and an enterprise long since planned occupied his attention for the rest of his last bachelor night. It was now October.

"A brace of pheasants would look mighty fine in Minnie's larder," thought Dan, an' there they shall be afore I go home to-night."

He had some vague idea of giving up his dishonest sport after marriage, but in his heart he knew that no such thing would happen.

Much talk of poaching was in the air at Moretonhampstead about this season, and raids and rumours of raids at Middlecott and elsewhere kept the keepers anxious and wakeful; but no sensation marked the opening of

the season, though Matthew Sweetland had secret troubles which he only imparted to his second in command, a young and zealous man called Adam Thorpe. Birds had gone and there were marks in the preserves that told ugly tales to skilled eyes; but Sweetland failed to bring the evil-doers to justice, and a cloud presently rose between his subordinate and himself. For Thorpe did not hesitate to declare that the headkeeper's own son was responsible. With all his soul Daniel's father resented this suspicion, and yet too well he knew the other had just grounds for it. Once only the father taxed Daniel, and the younger man fell into a rage and reminded old Sweetland how, long ago, he had sworn upon his oath never to enter Middlecott preserves.

"You ought to know me better than think it," he said bitterly. "Be I what I may, you've no just right to hold me an oath-breaker; an' if I meet that blustering fool, Thorpe, I'll mark him so's he'll carry my anger to the grave. Any fool could hoodwink him. He walks by night like an elephant. There's no fun in taking Middlecott pheasants. Anyway I never have, an' never will."

But the preserves at Westcombe, Daniel regarded differently. They extended under Hameldon on the skirt of the Moor; and this

night he meant to visit them and kill a bird or two. The moon would rise presently, and he knew where the pheasants roosted quite as well as the keeper who had bred them.

In the one spare room of Hangman's Hut were possessions of the young couple not yet arranged. Here stood the two little tin boxes that held all Minnie's possessions ; and various parcels and packages belonging to Daniel were also piled together in the chamber. A certain square wooden case was locked, and now, lighting a candle and pulling down the window-blind, Dan opened it. Not a few highly suspicious objects appeared. There were nets and wires here, with night-lines and a variety of mysterious things whose uses were known to the owner only. None other had ever set eyes upon them. A long black weapon of heavy metal lay at the bottom of the box, and this the poacher drew forth. Then he oiled it, pumped it, and loaded it. The thing was an air gun, powerful enough to destroy ground game at fifty yards. For a moment, however, Dan hesitated between this engine and another. Among his property was a neat yellow leather case with D. S. painted in black letters upon it. Within reposed the gun that Henry Vivian had given his friend as a wedding present.

The owner hesitated between these weapons.

His inclination was towards the fowling-piece ; his instinct turned him to the silent air-gun.

"Two shots at most, then a bolt," he reflected. "Anyway, there won't be a soul that side to-night, for Wilkins and the others at Westcombe will all be down on the lower side, where they are having a battoo to -morrow. So I'll chance it."

He broke open a box of cartridges, loaded the gun, and then left Hangman's Hut, locking the door behind him.

Westcombe lay midway between Middlecott and the Moor. Of old there had existed great rivalry between the houses of Vivian and Giffard as to their game, but for many years the first-named estates produced heavier bags, and, after the death of Sir George Giffard, Westcombe went steadily down, for Sir George's son and heir had little love of sport. Old Lady Giffard, however, still dwelt at Westcombe, and rejoiced to entertain the decreasing numbers of her late husband's friends. A shooting party was now collected at the old house, and a big battue had been planned for the following day.

"'Twould keep any but Mister Henry away from my wedding," thought Daniel. "Of course not one man in a million would put another chap's wedding afore a battoo. I

wouldn't. But he will. 'Tis an awful fine thing never to break your word, no doubt. You can trust that man like you can the sun."

The young poacher pursued his way without incident and sank into the underwoods of Westcombe as the moon rose. He waited an hour hidden within ten yards of the keepers' path, but silence reigned in the forest, and only the faint tinkle of frost under white moonlight reached his ear. Once or twice an uneasy cry or flutter from a bird that felt the gathering cold fell upon the night; and once, far away, Dan's ears marked gun-fire. The sound interested him exceedingly, for it certainly meant that somebody else was engaged upon his own rascally business. Long he listened, and presently other shots in quick succession clearly echoed across the peace of the hour. They were remote, but they came from Middlecott, as Daniel well knew.

"'Tis Thorpe an' my father for sartain," he said to himself. "Well, I hope father haven't met with no hurt to keep him away from my wedding."

Now Dan turned his attention to his own affairs and was soon in the coverts. He crept slowly through the brushwood and lifted his head cautiously at every few steps. Often for five minutes together he remained motionless

as the dead fern in which he stood, often he might have been a stock or stone, so still was he. Only the light in his eyes or the faint puff of steam at his lips indicated that he was alive. The pheasants slept snug aloft, and Dan heard a fox bark near him and smiled.

"You'm wanting your supper, my red hero, no doubt, an' can't reach it. Well, well, you'll have to go content wi' a rabbit; the long-tails be for your betters."

He had crossed a drive ten minutes later and was now in the midst of the preserves. Presently, at a spinney edge, he got the moon between himself and the fringe of the wood, and sneaked stealthily along examining the boughs above him as they were thrown into inky relief against the shining sky. Many birds he passed until at length he came to two sitting near together. Then, working to a point from which one bird came half into line with the other, he fired and dropped both. Like thunder the gun bellowed in that deep silence, and a lurid flame dimmed the silver of the night. Then peace returned, and long before a flat layer of smoke had risen above the tree-tops and dislimned under the moon; while still a subdued flutter and cry in the woods told of alarm, and the sharp smell of burnt powder hung in the air, Daniel Sweet-

land was off the Moor with two fine pheasants under his coat and his gun on his shoulder.

A mile away three keepers, watching round the best and richest covers of Westcombe, heard the poacher's gun and used bad language. Then two started whence the sound had come.

"I've christened you, anyway," said Dan to his new weapon. "Come to think of it, old Wilkins, the keeper at Westcombe, never gived my Minnie a wedding present, though a cousin by marriage. So now these here birds will do very nice instead, an' make us quits."

Within the hour he was back in the Moor and soon returned to his cottage. But a surprise awaited him, for upon the high road, as he passed the Warren Inn and prepared to turn off to where Hangman's Hut lay, with its two little windows glimmering like eyes under the moon, Daniel heard steady feet running slowly behind him and saw a man approaching along the way. Dan leapt off the high road instantly and hid himself beside the path. But the other apparently had not seen him, for he trotted past and went forward. Daniel left his hiding-place just in time to see a man vanishing into the night.

No little remained to be done before he sought the room he occupied in his father's house at Middlecott lodge gates. First he

returned to Hangman's Hut ; then he put up his gun and, taking a hammer, a big nail, and a piece of string, entered his garden and lifted the cover off a little well that stood there. He then bent over it and drove in his nail as far down as he could reach from the top. Next he fastened his pheasants to the string and lowered them twenty-five yards into the gloom beneath. The string he fastened to the nail.

"They'll do very nice an' comfortable there till us feel to want 'em," he thought. Then he locked up the house once more and started for Middlecott.

Again, as he passed over the Moor to the main road, did he hear the sound of feet not far off, and again did a man take shape out of the darkness and move away before him. This time the figure leapt up out of the heath right in his path, and hastened in the direction of Hangman's Hut.

"Be blessed if the whole parish ban't up an' doing to-night !" laughed Daniel. "'Tis some blackguard trapping Johnny Beer's rabbits, I lay."

Then he set off briskly homewards and did not stop until he passed the corner of Westcombe woods and saw two men standing together at the stile over which he had himself crept some hours before.

"Seen anybody upalong, mate?" asked one.

"Yes, I did," answered Daniel. "A chap in a hurry, too—running for his life."

"You be Dan Sweetland!" cried the other man. "Did you hear a gun fire awhile back, Sweetland?"

"I heard several," replied the young man. "They've been busy down to Middlecott, or I'm mistaken. For my part, I wish I'd been there; but I wasn't. Too much on my hands, you see, to trouble about sporting. I'm going to be married to-morrow; an' you can tell your old man, Wilkins, that my sweetheart was rather astonished he didn't give her a wedding present — him being related by marriage."

The keepers laughed. Both felt morally certain that Daniel had fired the shot which brought them from the distant woods; both knew that to prove it would be impossible.

"An' I dare say there'll be a nice pheasant for supper to-morrow night at Hangman's Hut —eh, Dan?" asked one.

"Oh, no, there won't, Jack Bates. I like my game hung a bit, same as the quality do. If you'll come to supper this day week, I'll see what I can do for 'e."

The keepers laughed again, and Sweetland went his way.

At home yet another surprise awaited him. His father's cottage flamed with lights. Instead of silence and sleep brooding here, with the glimmering leaden statues standing like sentinels above, as he had often seen them on returning from nocturnal enterprises, Dan found his father's cottage awake and full of stir and bustle. The door was open and from the kitchen came Matthew's voice.

When Dan entered Mr Sweetland was sitting in an old eared chair by the fire in his nightshirt. A red nightcap covered his head, and his person was largely exposed, where Mrs Sweetland applied vinegar and brown paper to red bruises. The keeper evidently endured great agony, but no sign of suffering escaped his lips.

He turned to Dan and spoke.

"Be that you? Where was you this night, Daniel?"

"Not in Middlecott Woods, father; that I'll swear to. But I'm feared that you was—to poor purpose. Have 'e caught anybody?"

"No; but Adam Thorpe was hit an' went down. Me an' him have long knowed what was doing, an' we gived it out at the White Hart bar in mixed company that we was to be in Thorley Bottom to-night. Then we went to the coverts instead, an', sure enough, surprised

my gentlemen. Two of 'em. They fired two shots, an' we laid wait an' went for 'em as they came out wi' birds. I got one down an' he bested me. What he've broken, if anything, I can't say. T'other fired on Thorpe an' he couldn't get up. Afterwards, when they'd got clear, I found he was alive but couldn't speak. Then I crawled to the house, an' some of the gentlemen and a indoor man or two comed out. 'Twas only eleven of the clock at latest. They carried Thorpe to the cottage hospital at Moreton, an' sent me home. Us'll hear to-morrow how he fares, poor soul."

"I knowed he'd catch it sooner or late," said Dan. "Such a cross-grained bully as him. But I hope 'twill larn him wisdom. An' you. Be you hurt in the breathing? Will 'e be at my wedding to-morrow? It shall be put off if you can't come."

"'Tis all right if you can swear you had no hand in this. That's the best plaster to my bruises," answered his father.

"Of course I can. Why for won't you trust me? I know nought about it—God's my judge."

"Then you'd better get to your bed an' sleep," said his mother.

"All's done at the Hut," he answered, "an' the carriage be ordered. After us be married,

we'll walk over to Minnie's aunt an' have the spread as the old woman have arranged ; then we'll drive straight away off to the Moor. An' if 'tis wet weather, us be going to have a covered cab ; for I won't have Minnie drowned on her wedding-day. Please God, you'll be up to coming to church, father."

"I shall be there," said Matthew—"there an' glad to be there, since you wasn't doing any harm this night. But Mr Henry may not come. I had speech with him, for the gentlemen hadn't gone to bed. Sir Reginald's in a proper fury. They'll leave no stone unturned to take the rascals. My man won't travel far, I should reckon, for I gived him quite as good as I got, maybe better."

"You've got enough anyway," declared the keeper's wife. "Now lean on Dan an' me, an' we'll fetch 'e up to your chamber."

Without a groan Matthew Sweetland let them help him to his bed ; but not until dawn did the pain of his bruises lessen and suffer him to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE WEDDING DAY

DANIEL'S wedding day dawned gloriously, and at the lodge gates a splendour of autumn foliage blazed in the morning light. But Mr Sweetland woke black and blue, and stiff in all his joints. He had broken a finger of the right hand; that, however, did not prevent him dressing in his best clothes and setting out to see his son married.

Daniel wished his friend, Titus, to be best man; but the circumstances made that impossible, since poor Sim himself had been a suitor. The lad, Sam Prowse, therefore filled that important post, and Minnie's aunt, an ancient widow named Mary Maine, gave the bride away.

Daniel and his party were the first to arrive at church; for Mr Sweetland called at the cottage hospital on his way and had his broken finger attended to. There he heard black news, but the keeper kept it to himself and presently joined his wife at church. People began to drop in by twos and threes, and Daniel, from a place in the choir stalls,

kept turning his head to the door. But those he looked for did not appear. Neither Titus Sim nor Henry Vivian was at his wedding, and the circumstance cast a gloom upon the bridegroom. He grumbled under his breath to Sam Prowse concerning the matter.

"I could have sworn them two men would have been here, come what might. Titus would never have missed seeing me turned off, if there wasn't some good reason against it. As for Mr Henry—he gave me his word, an' his word no man have known him to break. Something be wrong, Prowse, else they'd be here, both of 'em. 'Tis last night's work in the woods."

"Be that as it will, better not keep stretching forward so, else you'll burst thicky coat," said the cautious Prowse. "I see the seams of un-a-bulging over your back something cruel. There's Johnny Beer an' his missus. I knowed they'd come."

Five-and-twenty people formed the little congregation; the vicar appeared; the bride with her aunt walked up the aisle.

Minnie was self-possessed as usual. She wore a light blue dress, white thread gloves, and a hat with a jay's wing in it that Dan had given her. One swift peep up at the face of her lover she gave, one little smile touched her

mouth and vanished; then, without a quiver, she pulled off her gloves and opened her prayer-book. Dan had his ready also. Beside her niece stood Mrs Maine, in a bright purple dress, and a bonnet that trembled with magenta roses and red ribbons. On Daniel's right young Prowse appeared. He kept one hand in his trouser pocket and held the ring tightly on the tip of his little finger, so that it should be ready for the bridegroom when the critical moment came.

Mrs Sweetland was early dissolved in moisture, and Mrs Beer likewise wept. Matthew Sweetland seemed distracted and his thoughts were elsewhere, for a great terror sat at the man's heart.

Then the ceremony concluded; the bell-ringers clattered back to the belfry; the wedding party entered the vestry.

A cloud hung dark over Daniel, and only Minnie had power to lessen it. He signed his name moodily and was loud to all who would listen in expressions of wonder and regret that Henry Vivian and Titus Sim had not been at his wedding.

"Of course there was the battoo at Westcombe—yet somehow—he promised, mind you—he promised. As to Sim, he must be sick; nought but illness would have kept him."

“Don’t judge the young youth,” said Mary Maine. “You forget he wanted Minnie too. Perhaps, when it comed to the point, he felt he couldn’t bear the wrench of seeing her made over to you by holy Prayer-book for evermore.”

A brave banquet was spread at Mrs Maine’s, and since all invited to it could not get into the parlour, an overflow of feeders took their dinner in the kitchen. Mr Beer’s pleasure was spoilt entirely by this circumstance, and his wife never liked Minnie’s aunt again. For the publican, by reason of his bulk, was invited to join the minor company in the kitchen; and then, when the time came, Daniel roared to him from the other room to come into the parlour and propose the bride’s health.

But this Mr Beer stoutly refused to do. His lady answered for him and her tartness struck all the wedding guests with consternation. Sour words from Mrs Beer were like bad grapes from a good vine.

“We’m very comfortable here, thank you, Mr Sweetland,” she shrilled back in answer to Daniel. “We know our place, since Mrs Maine has made it so clear. Us will tell our own speeches in the kitchen; an’ you can tell yours in the parlour; an’ it may be news

to Mrs Maine that all the jugs on our table be empty—have been this long while.”

“An’ the room, small though it be, ban’t so small as the beer was,” added Mr Beer, with the note of an angry blackbird.

The empty jugs were filled; but nothing could remedy Mrs Maine’s error. So she lost her temper and began making pointed remarks about a silk purse and a sow’s ear. The visitors hastened to finish their meal, and Dan’s wedding breakfast ended without speeches or health-drinking. Since the beginning of the festivity there had indeed been a shadow in the air, and men and women whispered under their breath concerning the tragedy of the previous night. But the truth was hidden with general kindness of mind from the young bride and bridegroom. Now, indeed, it could be concealed no longer, and, horrible as a sudden death, there burst upon Daniel Sweetland and his new-made wife the tragedy of their lives.

The time for departure came and Daniel noticed that a crowd considerably larger than might have been expected began to gather at the railings of Mrs Maine’s cottage garden. Once or twice he saw Luke Bartley, the policeman, pass and order the people further back; then, as he himself emerged, with

Minnie on his arm, the crowd overpowered Mr Bartley and came close. Daniel stared and his jaw stuck out and hardened, for no cheer or friendly shout greeted him now. Instead there rose hisses in the air and a hoarse under-sound, or growl, as of angry beasts.

Turning to learn the cause, two men suddenly approached him. One was the local inspector of police, a strong, brisk officer in uniform; the other Daniel had never seen before. Even at that tremendous moment young Sweetland's interest was arrested. The stranger who now spoke to him stood six feet six inches and was evidently as powerful as he was tall. He dwarfed the people about him and his big voice rolled out so that it seemed to smother the church bells, which were now clashing a final peal of farewell to the departing pair.

"Who be you—Goliath of Gath, I should reckon?" said Dan stoutly, as the big man barred his way.

"No matter who I am," he answered. "The question is—Who are you?"

"'Tis Daniel Sweetland — just married," declared Inspector Gregory, who knew the Sweetlands well. "Sorry I am, Dan, to come between you an' the joy of life at this minute ;

but so it must be. This here man's a plain-clothes officer from Plymouth; an' he've got the warrants all right an' regular. You'm arrested for the murder of Adam Thorpe last night in Middlecott Lower Hundred. He was shot in the belly, an' he died to hospital just after dawn this morning."

The prisoner fell back and the world swam round him. Then his wife's small hand came into his.

"Be a man, Dan. Swear afore God you didn't do it; an' to God leave the rest," she said loud and clear so that all heard her.

"Afore God, an' humans, an' angels, I be innocent of this," said Daniel. "Never in all my life have I lifted a hand against any fellow-creature—except Saul Pratt when he insulted me in the street. Who brings this against me? Who charges me?"

The facts were briefly stated—not by the police, but by Daniel's friend, Titus Sim. He broke through the crowd and spoke in the other's ear.

"Listen to me, Dan. 'Tis life or death for 'e. Who had your gun last night? All hinges on that. At dawn yesterday I was called up by Mr Henry, and only then did I know what had falled out. He told me of the raid and ordered me to come down straight

into the woods an' search the ground to find any mark or trace of the murderer. For murder it was, because at cocklight came the news from Moreton Hospital that Thorpe was dead. We went—him and me alone—and searched the ground foot by foot. Then I found your gun—one barrel empty, t'other loaded. I knew 'twas the new one he had given you, and, in sudden fear, I was just going to try and hide it. But Mr Henry had seen it. He came over and recognised it at once."

"If it hinges on that, I'm safe," said Daniel. "'Tis all right, Minnie. I be safe enough! You go to Hangman's Hut, 'pon Dartymoor, my bold heroes, an' you'll find my gun in its case, where I put it last night with my own hands."

"Won't do, Daniel," answered the Inspector. "We had a warrant for search as well as for arrest. I was at Hangman's Hut at midday with this man here. Us did no harm, I promise you. But we found the gun-case—empty—also a box of cartridges broke open an' two missing."

"You'll have plenty of time to talk later on," said the big man. "But you've got to come along wi' us to Plymouth now, Daniel Sweetland, so the sooner we start the better. I hope

as you'll prove yourself innocent with all my heart; but that's your business. Now I must do mine."

In an instant Dan's hands were fastened together. Powerful and stout though he was, he found himself a child in the giant's grasp. Indeed, the young man made no struggle. He felt dazed and believed that from this nightmare he must presently awaken.

The steel clicked over his wrists and his mother screamed. At the same moment Bartley brought up a dog-cart. In it a big, restive horse leapt to be gone.

Daniel turned to Titus Sim.

"I can't believe I'm waking, old pal," he said. "Be I married? Be I dreaming? Murder—to murder a man! Do your best, Titus; do what you can for me. Try an' bring a spark of hope to father an' mother. They know I'm innocent of this—so does Minnie. Do what you can. An' Mr Henry—he don't think 'twas me? He wouldn't judge me so cruel?"

"He's hard and a terrible stickler for justice. But be sure we'll do what men may, Daniel."

"Then 'tis to you I'll trust—to you an' my own wits. Good-bye, Minnie; keep up your brave heart as well as you can. 'Twill come right. I must think—I can prove—at least.

There—be brave, all of 'e. Don't you weep, mother. You've got my solemn word I didn't do it; an' if the rope was round my neck, I'd say the same."

The old woman sank away from him and fainted; Minnie stood close to him until he was helped into the trap; Sim shook his handcuffed hand. The crowd was divided and men's voices rose in argument. The last to speak was Daniel's father.

"Keep a stiff upper-lip, my son," he said. "Us'll do what we can. I'll go to Lawyer Jacobs to Newton this very day. Us'll fight for 'e with all our power."

Daniel nodded.

"Bid mother cheer up when she comes to," he said. "I ban't feared. An' take care o' Minnie."

He sat on the front of the trap and the big man drove. Upon the back seat were Inspector Gregory and the policeman, Luke Bartley.

The horse was given its head, and soon Daniel had vanished. He was to be driven over the Moor to Plymouth.

For a moment Minnie seemed to be forgotten. Then she went quietly to her weeping aunt and kissed her.

"I be going now," she said.

"Going—going where, you poor, deserted, tibby lamb? Where should you go?"

"To my home," answered the girl. "I'm Mrs Daniel Sweetland now. I've got to keep up Dan's name afore the world an' be the mistress of his house. 'Tis waiting for me. I'll have it vitty for him when he comes back-along."

"Go up there all alone to that wisht hovel in the middle of them deadly bogs? You sha'n't do it, Minnie—I won't let you."

"An' the name of the place!" groaned Mr Beer. "I prayed un to alter it too. 'Twas bound to bring ill fortune. Now 'tis an omen."

"I'm going, however. 'Tis my duty. An' so soon as may be I'll get down to Plymouth to see him," declared the girl.

A cab, that was to have driven Daniel and Minnie, still waited. Now she walked to it and opened the door.

"Drive me up to Warren Inn 'pon Darty-moor, my boy," she said. "From there I can walk."

Then she turned and approached Mrs Sweetland.

"My place is in his home, mother. Don't you fear nothing. I'll be a good wife to your son, an' a good daughter to you. Our Dan be in the hands of God. Good-bye, all—good-bye."

She drove away, and the men who had hissed at her husband cheered her.

“Dammy—a good pucked un!” cried a thin, gnarled figure with a green shade over his eye. “Lucky’s the he that gets that she, whether it be yon chap or another after he swings!”

The man was called Rix Parkinson, and he held the proud dual position of leading drunkard and leading poacher in Moreton. He was drunk now, but people nearly always found themselves in agreement with him when he was sober and cared to talk.

A buzz and babel turned round Mrs Maine and the Sweetlands. Then the gamekeeper and Titus Sim talked apart.

“There’s a train to Newton Abbot half after six,” said Matthew. “I’ll go by it an’ have a tell with Lawyer Jacobs.”

“And what I can do with Mr Henry I will do,” said Sim.

His eyes were upon Minnie Sweetland’s carriage as it drove away with the little blue figure sitting bravely in it—alone.

Johnny Beer’s wife had been forgotten, and she wept in a small circle of children who had gathered about her.

“What a wedding night for a dinky maiden!” sobbed Jane Beer; “but me an’ my man will

go over to hearten her up, if 'tis in mortal power to do it."

Anon the people scattered, and the day was done. A grey gloaming settled upon the Moor, and their eternal cloud-caps rolled over the tors and stifled the light of evening.

A dog-cart with a fine trotting horse in it swept along over the long, straight stretch to the Warren Inn, and some miles in the rear of it Daniel Sweetland's wife followed behind. She sat in an open fly and was drawn by an old grey mare who had assisted at a hundred weddings. But her driver had taken the ribbons off his whip and flung away the flowers from his buttonhole. He numbered only twelve years; yet he had sense to see that the moment was not one for show of joy.

"They'll never hang such a rare fine chap," he said; "I'm sure they never would do such a terrible rash thing, miss."

CHAPTER V

A GHOST OF A CHANCE

HIS first experience of life crushed down with all the weight of the world on Daniel Sweetland and kept him dumb. He stared straight before him and only answered with nod or shake of head the remarks addressed to him by Luke Bartley and the inspector.

"Better leave the lad in peace," said the kindly giant, who drove. "He wants to think, an' no doubt he's got a deal to think about."

The prisoner's native genius now worked swiftly with him, and his sole thought was of escape as dusk gathered on Dartmoor. He puzzled his head in vain to see the drift of these doings. It seemed that his gun had been found beside the spot where Adam Thorpe was shot. What human hands could have put it there? He knew of no enemy on earth. Measuring the chances of establishing an *alibi*, he saw that they were small. Search could prove the fact that he had killed pheasants on the previous night, and it was

quite possible for him to have killed a man also. He might have shot Thorpe at Middlecott and have spoken to the other keepers at Westcombe afterwards. Indeed, the hours agreed. Then he remembered the shadow that had leapt up out of the heath when he left Hangman's Hut for the last time. That man it was who had destroyed him; and that man would never be found unless Daniel himself made the discovery. Revolving the matter in his young brains, the poacher believed that his only chance was present escape.

Once free and beyond the immediate and awful danger of the moment, Daniel Sweetland trusted that he might establish his innocence and prove the truth. But as a prisoner on trial, with his present scanty knowledge, there appeared no shadow of hope. He looked up at the man who drove and instinctively strained the steel that handcuffed his wrists. Escape seemed a possibility as remote as any miracle.

"What be your name, policeman?" asked Daniel, meekly. "You took me very quiet an' gentle, an' I thank you for it."

"I'm called Corder—Alfred Corder. I'm the biggest man in the force."

"An' so strong as you'm big, by the looks of it."

"Well, I've yet to meet my master," said the officer. He had one little vanity, and that was his biceps.

"Be you any relation to Alf Corder, the champion of Devon wrestling, then?"

"I am the man," said Mr Corder. "Never been throwed since I was twenty-two; an' now I'm thirty-four."

Daniel nodded.

"A very famous hero. I should have thought you'd make more money wrestling in London than ever you would doing cop's work to Plymouth."

The giant was interested at this intelligent remark.

"I've often been tempted to try; but I'm not a man that moves very quick in my mind; though I can shift my sixteen stone of carcase quick enough when it comes to wrestling or fighting. Once my hand gets over a limb, it sticks—like a bull-dog's teeth. 'Tis the greatest grip known in the West Country—to say it without boasting."

Daniel nodded and relapsed into silence. He was thinking hard now. All his ideas centred on the wild hope to escape. Scheme after scheme sped through his brains. Once a shadowy enterprise actually developed, but he dismissed it as vain.

Then Luke Bartley spoke to Mr Corder and suggested another line of action.

"This here was the man who had that cute thought that the burglars to Westcombe got away on a motor-car—didn't he, Gregory?"

The inspector admitted it.

"Yes; I gave you all credit for that, Sweetland. 'Twas a clever opinion, and the right one. I'm sure of that. Hue an' cry was so quick that they never could have got clear off with any slower vehicle."

Daniel made no answer; but he jumped at the topic of the recent burglary and turned it swiftly in his mind. Here, perhaps, was the chance he wanted. For half an hour he kept silence; then he spoke to Bartley.

"'Twas you who first thought as I might have a hand in that business myself, Luke?"

"No, no; Mr Gregory here."

"Of course, I hope you hadn't; but you might have had. Anyhow, that will be a mystery for evermore, I reckon," said the inspector.

"Five thousand pounds' worth of plate they took," explained Daniel to his driver; but Mr Corder knew all about it.

"Five thousand and more. 'Twas always a great regret to me that I wasn't in that job."

"You couldn't have done no better than I done," struck in Gregory. "That I'll swear to. The London man gave me great credit for what I did do. He said he'd never known such a nose for a clue. That was his own words."

"It was," declared Bartley. "That was the very word of the London man, for I heard it."

"They are not a bit smarter than us to Plymouth really," said Corder. "I've known them make mistakes that I'd have blushed to make. But 'tis just London. If a thing comes from London it must be first chop. They only beat Plymouth in one matter as I knows about; an' that's their criminal classes."

"Not but what we've got our flyers at a crime too," said Mr Gregory, who was highly patriotic. "Take that there burglary job to Westcombe. 'Twasn't a fool who planned and carried that out."

"But they comed down from London for certain," argued Corder.

"They might, or they might not," answered the inspector.

"Then, for murders like this here murder of Adam Thorpe," added Bartley. "I'm sure the county of Devon stands so high as anybody could wish. 'Tisn't a deed to be proud

of, certainly; but I won't allow for one that London beats Devonsheer in anything. As many hangs to Exeter gaol as to any other county gaol in my knowledge."

"Shall I hang over this job, do 'e reckon, Mr Corder?" asked Daniel, humbly.

"Ban't for me to say, my son. A gun be a very damning piece of evidence. But if you can prove you wasn't there, that's all that need be done."

"I was using my gun, but—"

"Don't say nothing to me," interrupted the giant. "I wish you well; but anything you say is liable to be used against you according to law. Therefore you'll do wisest to keep your mouth shut till you can get your lawyer to listen to you."

Silence fell; then the Warren Inn came into sight, and at the same moment Mr Corder pulled up and looked anxiously down his horse's flank.

"Just jump out, will 'e, one of you men, an' see if he's picked up a stone. He has gone lame all of a sudden—in the near hind leg, I think."

Bartley alighted and lifted the horse's hoof. Then he examined the others. But there was no stone. Yet the horse went lame when they started again.

"He's hurt his frog. He'll be all right in an hour," said Gregory, who was learned on the subject. "Here's the Warren Inn just handy. You'll do well to put up there for a bit. Us can go in the parlour an' wait; then, if there's any in the bar, they won't see us."

John Beer and his wife were, of course, not yet at home; but a potman kept house and waited in the public room.

The place was empty. Mr Corder and Gregory took Daniel Sweetland into a little parlour, while Bartley stabled the lame horse.

Presently he returned and brought a lamp with him, for it was now growing dark.

"An hour I'll wait, and only an hour," declared Corder. "Then, if the horse be still lame, we must get another."

The officers sent for bread, cheese and beer. They asked Daniel to join them, and he agreed; then suddenly, while they were at their meal, he spoke.

"I've got a word to say to you chaps. 'Tis a terrible matter, but I'd rather have it off my mind than on it just at present. Will you do the fair thing if I tell you, an' give me credit after?"

"You'd better far keep quiet," said Corder.

"'Tis like this. The cleverness of you three men mazes me. To think as Gregory here

saw so clear about the burglary; an' Bartley too! Well, now your horse goes lame an' everything. 'Tis fate, an' so I'll speak if you'll listen. Only I ax this as a prisoner; I ax this as the weak prays the strong for mercy; that you'll remember to my credit how I made a clean breast of everything without any pressure from any of you."

Mr Corder stared.

"Trouble's turned your head, my son, by the looks of it. Whatever rummage be you talking about?"

"'Tis sense, I promise you. I nearly told just now when us was speaking about the burglary. Then, just here of all places, your horse falls lame. 'Tis like Providence calling me to speak."

Daniel was playing his solitary card. The chances were still a thousand to one against him; but he saw a faint possibility, if things should fall out right. His swift mind had seized the accident of the horse's lameness, and his plot was made.

"Be plain if you can," said Corder. "Don't think I'm against you. Only I say again, there's no power in us to help you, even if we had the will."

"I'm thinking of last August—that burglary. Well, now, how about it if I was able to help

you chaps to clear that up? Wouldn't I be doing you a good turn, Greg, if you was able to say at headquarters that by cross-questioning me you'd wormed the truth out of me?"

Mr Gregory stared. He licked his lips at the very idea.

"An' if Mr Corder here was agreeable, an' let me explain, you might find that when you drive into Plymouth in a few hours' time, you would be taking five thousand pounds of silver plate along with you, besides me. Wouldn't there be a bit of a stir about it—not to name the reward? Why, you'd all be promoted for certain."

"Twelve hundred and fifty pounds' reward was offered by the parties," said Mr Corder.

"And do you mean that you know anything?" asked the inspector, much excited.

"I mean this. You was right, Gregory, I didn't do the burglary, but I knowed about it, and I can tell you all an' more than you want to know. There's twelve hundred and fifty pounds for the men who recover that Giffard silver; an' it can be done. But what I ax you three men is this—If I put that money into your pockets, will you do something for me?"

"That's impossible," answered Corder, firmly.

"I know what's in your mind, my lad; and 'tis

natural enough that it should be; but you might so soon ask them handcuffs on your wrist to open without my key as ask me to help you now, if that's your game."

"It isn't," answered Daniel. "Afore God, no such thought as axing you to let me go comed in my mind. 'Twould be like offering you three men five thousand pound to let me off. I wouldn't dream of such a thing. You're honourable, upright chaps, an' I respect you all a lot too much to do it. Five thousand pound divided into three be only a dirty little sixteen hundred or so apiece. Though, as a matter of fact, there was far more took than that. But I never meant no such thing. I'm booked for trial, an' you can't help me. No, you can't help me—none of you. 'Tis my poor little wife I be breaking my heart for."

A fly crawled up to the inn as Daniel spoke and stopped at the door. Looking out through the open window, he caught a passing glimpse of Minnie herself under the lamp at the door, and heard her voice. She paid the driver and he went into the bar; but Daniel knew that Minnie was now walking alone across the Moor to Hangman's Hut.

"Go on," said Gregory. "Let's hear all you've got to say. No harm in that. My heart bleeds for your mother, not your wife,

Sweetland. Little did she think that she was bringing such a bad lot into the world the day you was born."

"I'm not so bad neither. Anyway, time's too short to be sorry now. 'Tis like this. It's not in my mind to ax anything for myself; but I pray for a bit of mercy for my wife. If I swing over this, what becomes of her? She've got but fifty-five pounds in the world."

"'Tis enough to keep her till an honest man comes along an' marries her," said Bartley. "For that matter, Titus Sim will wed her if the worst overtakes you, Daniel."

"You put it plain," answered the prisoner, "an' I thank you for it, Luke. All the same, they may not hang me; an' if I get penal servitude, Minnie can't marry any other man. Now the reward for finding out that burglary job be twelve hundred an' fifty pounds, as Mr Corder says. That divided betwixt the three of you would be four hundred odd apiece. An' I want to know just what you'll do about it. In exchange for the money an' fame an' glory this job will bring you men, I want two hundred pounds—not for myself, but for my poor girl. Ban't much to ax, an' not a penny less will I take. That's my offer, an you'd best to think upon it. If you refuse, I shall make it to somebody else."

Silence followed. Then Dan spoke again.

"'Tis terrible awkward eating bread an' cheese wi' handcuffs on. Will e' take 'em off for a bit, please? I can't get out of the winder, for 'tis too small; so if you stands afore the door, you needn't fear I'll give you the slip."

Mr Corder perceived the truth of this and freed the prisoner's hands.

"You've put a pretty problem afore us, young man," he said; "an' us must weigh it in all its parts. Can't say as ever I had a similar case in my experience."

"Nor me neither," declared Inspector Gregory.

Bartley remained silent. He was asking himself what it would feel like to be the richer by hundreds of pounds.

Daniel ate his bread and cheese, drank a pint of beer, and held out his wrists for the handcuffs.

Then Mr Corder himself went to see to his horse, and while he was away Daniel spoke to the others.

"You chaps know how hard a thing it is to get the public ear. Surely—surely 'tis worth your while to find out this great burglary job an' put money in your pockets? You'm fools to hesitate. But if you be such greedy souls that

you won't spare a crumb to my poor wife, then you sha'n't have a penny, so help me."

"'Tis throwing away money to refuse," declared Bartley to Corder, who now returned. "You see, that money have got to be earned, an' why for shouldn't we earn it? There's no under-handed dealings, or playing with the law."

"The hoss is all right again, an' the sooner we go the better," answered Mr Corder.

"You won't fall in then?" asked Daniel, with a sinking heart.

"I don't say that; but if you'm in earnest, you can tell us all about it as we go along."

"An' you'll swear, all three of you, to give Minnie Sweetland two hundred pounds of the reward?"

"I will," said Bartley. "'Tis flying in the face of Providence to do otherwise."

"If it can be proved we'm not straining the law, I'll do the same," declared Inspector Gregory. "What do you say, Corder?"

"The law's clear, for that matter," answered the big man. "The law ban't strained. The law have nothing to do with a private bargain. This here man comes to us an' says, 'I'll put you chaps in the way to make twelve hundred an' fifty pounds between you.' An' we says, 'Do it.' Then he says, 'But I must have two

hundred for my wife ; because I, who be her natural support, be taken from her.' Well—there it is. My conscience is clear. Since he's brought to book an' may go down on it, the burglary never will be any use to him ; so he peaches. For my part I'll promise what he wants this minute."

"And so will I," said Bartley. "'Tis a very honest, open offer for a condemned man."

"Not condemned at all—merely an arrested man," corrected Gregory. "An' I'll take his offer too," he added ; "so it only remains for him to tell us where the stuff be hidden."

Daniel looked straight into Corder's face.

"That was why I axed you not to be in a hurry," he said. "The Giffard plate from Westcombe was brought up to the Moor, an' such a fuss have been made that the burglars haven't been able to get it clear for all these weeks. Nobody dared to go near it. But I've kept secret watch on it for 'em. As for the stuff, 'tis within a mile of this very house, though I daresay Johnny Beer would have a fit if he knowed about it."

"Within reach of us ?" gasped Bartley.

"That's why I said you could take it along to Plymouth to-night, if you had a mind to. Drive across with me into King's Oven under Hurston Ridge an' borrow a spade or two, an'

I'll wager you'll have every pennyweight of the silver in your trap in two hours or less from this minute. Take it or leave it. I'm in solemn earnest ; that I swear to. Only this I'll say : you'll not find it without me—not if you dig for ever an' a day. 'Tis safe enough."

The policemen held a hurried colloquy aside. In Gregory's mind was a growing suspicion that the prisoner did not speak the truth. But the others believed him.

"What motive should he have to lie about it?" asked Corder, under his breath. "It won't advantage him if we find nothing. If we do find it, the credit is ours. An' I sh'a'nt grudge his wife her share of the reward, I'm sure. Ban't even as if 'twas blood money ; for that stealing job won't make any difference to this hanging one. Better let him show us the stuff now. Who be the worse? If he's fooling us, he's not helping himself. For my part, I believe him. He's just come from marrying his wife ; an' 'tis human nature that she should be the uppermost thought in his heart."

"King's Oven do lie no more than a mile from here," said Gregory ; "so there's no reason why we shouldn't get going. You put in the hoss, Luke. Sooner this job's over an' we'm on the Plymouth road again, the better I'll be pleased."

Corder spoke to Daniel.

"We'll fall in with your offer, young man. Show us that stuff an' your missis shall have her two hundred pounds so soon as the reward is paid."

"Very well. If you slip a spade and a pick or two in the trap afore we start, 'twill be all the better. An' a bit of rope, for that matter. Us have got our work cut out," answered the prisoner. "What they Londoners will say to me for turning traitor, I don't know; an' I don't care now neither," he added.

"You won't give 'em up?"

"Not the men. Only the stuff—for my wife's sake."

Bartley brought the trap to the door, and as Sweetland was helped in, Mr Beer and his wife drove up in their little market cart.

The police said nothing, and soon they were on their way again, but not before Johnny Beer had spoken to his friend.

"Keep a cheerful face in this terrible case. Us'll do all we can for our old pal, Dan. To think of the tragedy on your wedding day! It have so got hold upon me that I've made tragical rhymes upon it all the way back from Moreton. Please God, I'll get the chance to tell 'em to 'e some day."

"I hope you will, Johnny, though it don't look very likely."

The trap drove off. Its lamps were lighted, and they cast a bright blaze forward into a dark night. Presently Daniel stopped them, and Bartley jumped down and took the horse's head.

"Now keep over the grass track to the right an' us will be in King's Oven in ten minutes," said Sweetland.

Swaying and jolting, their dog-cart proceeded into the great central silence and stillness of the Moor.

CHAPTER VI

THE WEDDING NIGHT

FURNAM REGIS, or the King's Oven, is a wild and lonely spot lying beneath a cairn-crested hill of mid Dartmoor. Here in centuries past was practised the industry of tin-smelting, and to the present time a thousand decaying evidences of that vanished purpose still meet the eye. The foundations of ruins are yet apparent in a chaos of shattered stone; broken pounds extend their walls into the waste around about; hard by a mine once worked, and much stone from the King's Oven was removed for the construction of buildings which are to-day themselves in ruins. Now the fox breeds in this fastness, and only roaming cattle or the little ponies have any business therein. A spot better adapted for the bestowal of stolen property could hardly be conceived.

Three hundred yards from the entrance of the Oven, Daniel stopped the trap and the men alighted.

"I must get two of the rocks in line with

the old stones 'pon top the hill," said Daniel. "That done, I know where to set you fellows digging."

They proceeded as he directed. Corder walked on one side of the prisoner and Gregory upon the other; while Luke Bartley, with two spades and a pickaxe on his shoulder, came behind them.

The moon now rose and the darkness lifted. Sweetland walked about for some time until a certain point arrested him. This rock, after some shifting of their position, he presently brought into line with another, and then it seemed that both were hidden by the towering top of the cairn that rose into the moonlight beyond them.

"Here we are," he said. "An' first you've got to shift this here gert boulder. It took three men to turn it over and then pull it back into its place; an' it will ax for all you three can do to treat it likewise."

The rope was brought, and with the help of the mighty Corder a large block of granite was dragged out of its bed. The naked earth spread beneath.

"You'll find solid stone for two feet," declared Daniel, "for we filled up with soil an' granite, an' trampled all so hard an' firm as our feet could do it. The hole we dug goes

two feet down ; then it runs under thicky rock to the left."

Without words the men set to work and Daniel expressed increasing impatience.

"Lord! to see you chaps with spades! But, of course, you haven't been educated to it. You'll be all night. I wish I could help you ; but I can't."

"We'll shift it," declared Corder. "Wait till the moon's a thought higher ; then we'll see what we're at easier."

He toiled mightily and cast huge masses of earth out of a growing hole ; but the ground was full of great stones ; and sometimes all three officers had to work together to drag a mass of granite out of the earth.

"You chaps wouldn't have made your fortunes at spade work—that's a fact," said Daniel. "I wish you'd let me help. If you freed my hands, there'd be no danger in it so long as you tied my legs."

Bartley stopped a moment to rest his aching back.

"'Tis a fair offer," he said. "If you make fast the man's legs, he couldn't give us the slip. I can't do no more of this labour, anyway. I've earned my living with my brains all my life, an' I ban't built to do ploughboy's work now I'm getting up

in years. I be sweating my strength out as 'tis."

Gregory agreed.

"Time's everything," he said. "If you take that there rope an' tie him by the leg to this stone what we've moved, he's just as safe as if he was handcuffed. Then he can dig for us, as he well knows how."

Mr Corder considered this course, and then agreed to it. The rope was knotted round Daniel's leg, and he found himself tied fast to the great rock that had been recently moved; then Mr Corder took off the handcuffs.

"No tricks mind," he said. "I'm a merciful man an' wish you no harm; but if you try to run for it, I'll knock you down as if you was a rabbit."

"You're right not to trust me," answered the poacher, calmly; "but give me that spade an' you'll see I'm in earnest. I want two hundred pound for my wife, don't I? If we take turn an' turn about, we'll soon shift this muck. 'Twill be better for two to dig. Ban't room for three."

The critical moment of Daniel's plot now approached; but he kept a grip on his nerves and succeeded in concealing his great excitement. All depended on the next half hour.

He and Corder now began to work steadily, while the others rested and watched them. The moon shone brightly, and a mound of earth and stone increased beside the hole they dug. Presently Gregory and Bartley took a turn; but the latter had not dug five minutes when Daniel snatched his spade from him and continued the work himself.

"I can't stand watching you," he said. "Such weak hands I never seed in my life. A man would be rotten long afore his grave was dug, if you had the digging."

"I works with the intellects," answered Mr Bartley. "My calling in life is higher than a sexton's, I hope."

After another period of labour, Corder took the inspector's place, and soon the aperture gaped two feet deep.

"That's it; now we've got to sink to the left," explained Sweetland. "We run another two feet under this here ledge and then we come to the stuff."

Now he was working with Gregory again and the moment for action had arrived. Opportunity had to be made, however, and Daniel's escape depended entirely upon Mr Corder's answer to his next question. He knew that with the giant present his plans must fail; but if Corder could be induced

to go aside, Daniel felt that the rest was not difficult.

"Can't see no more," he said. "If you'll fetch one of the gig lamps, Mr Corder, us will know where we are. You'll want the lamp in a minute anyway, when we come to the plate, for 'twas all thrown loose into the earth."

Without answering, the big policeman fell into the trap. He had to go nearly three hundred yards for the lamp, and, allowing him above a minute for that journey, Daniel Sweetland made his plunge for liberty. Suddenly, without a moment's warning, he turned upon Gregory as the inspector bent beside him, and struck the man an awful blow with his spade full upon the top of the head.

"Sorry, Greg!" he cried, as the officer fell in a heap, "but if I've got to swing, it shall be for something, not nothing."

Even as he spoke Daniel had reached to the length of his rope and collared Bartley. The strong man he had struck senseless according to his intention; the weak one he now prepared to deal with. Bartley screamed like a hunted hare, for he supposed that his hour was come. Then Daniel saw the distant light leap forward. Only seconds remained, and only seconds were necessary.

"Be quiet and hand me your knife, or I'll

smash your skull in too!" he shouted to the shaking policeman; then he stretched for the handcuffs, which Corder had put on a stone beside him, and in a second Luke Bartley found himself on the ground beside his colleague. A moment later and he was chained to the recumbent and senseless person of the inspector, while Daniel knelt beside him and extracted from his pocket the knife he now required. With this he cut the rope that held him prisoner and, during the ten seconds that remained, before Mr Corder rushed upon the scene, Daniel had put forty yards of darkness between himself and his guards.

The Plymouth man now found his work cut out for him. Gregory was still unconscious and Bartley had become hysterical and was rolling with his face on the earth howling for mercy. Mr Corder liberated him and kicked him into reason. Then Luke told his tale while the other tended the unfortunate inspector.

"He falled upon the man with his spade, like a devil from hell, an' afore I could start my frozen limbs an' strike him down, he'd got me in his clutches an' handcuffed my wrist to this poor corpse here."

But Gregory was not a corpse. In two minutes he had recovered his senses and sat up with his feet in the pit.

“What’s happened?” he asked. “Where’s Daniel Sweetland to? Who hit me? Was it lightning?”

“’Twas him,” answered Corder; “an’ there’s no time to lose. If you can walk, take my arm an’ we’ll go back this minute. I’m going to drive to Princetown at once an’ give the alarm there. ’Tis only a matter of ten mile, an’ the civil guard at the prison know the Moor an’ will lend a hand to catch the man as soon as daylight comes. He can’t be off much sooner.”

“An’ this here silver treasure?” asked Mr Bartley.

“This here silver grandmother!” answered the other bitterly. “He’s done us—done me—me as have had some credit in my time, I believe. There—don’t talk—I could spit blood for this!—but words be vain. I sha’n’t have another peaceful moment till I’ve got that anointed rascal in irons again. ’Tis a lesson that may cost me a pension.”

Corder gave his arm to Gregory and Bartley walked in front with the lantern.

“A gashly company we make, sure enough,” said the pioneer. “The wickedness of that limb! An’ I thought for certain as my death had come. Talk about London—I’d like to see a worse unhung ruffian there, or anywhere.

The man don't live that's worse than Sweetland. I never knowed there was such a liar in the universe."

A last surprise awaited them and made the long journey to Princetown impossible until dawn.

When they reached the dogcart they found it supported by the shafts alone, for the horse was gone.

"He'll get to Plymouth after all, I reckon," said Corder, blankly; "but we sha'n't—not this side of morning. Us have got to walk ten mile on end to reach Princetown, let alone Plymouth. That's what us have got to do."

"While we talked, he took the hoss. The devil's cunning of that man!" groaned Bartley.

Meantime Daniel Sweetland was riding bare-backed over Dartmoor to his new home.

He knew the way very well and threaded many a bog and leapt a stream or two; then breasted a hill and looked down where, like a glow-worm, one little warm light glimmered in the silver and ebony of the nocturnal desert.

For the first time that day his heart grew soft.

"Her—all alone!" he thought. "I might have knowed she'd come. That's her place now; an' mine be alongside her!"

He formed the resolution to see Minnie at any cost.

“Us’ll eat supper alone together for once, though the devil gets the reckoning,” he said. “I lay my pretty have had no stomach for victuals this night.”

Five minutes later a horse stopped at Hangman’s Hut, and Minnie, unlocking the door, found herself in her husband’s arms.

“Ban’t much of a wedding night,” he said; “but such as ’tis us’ll make the most of it. I’ve foxed ’em very nice with a yarn about that burglary, of which I know no more than the dead really. But you’ll hear tell about that presently. An’ to-night they’ll have a pretty walk to Princetown, for the only horse except this one within five miles belongs to Johnny Beer; an’ ’tis tired out after the journey to Moreton.”

Minnie was far less calm than when she left him in the morning. Even her steady nerve failed her now, and for the only time in his life Daniel saw her weep.

“Don’t you do that,” he said. “Ban’t no hour for tears. Fetch in all the food in the house, an’ that bottle of wine I got for ’e. Can’t stop long, worse luck.”

“I know right well you’m an innocent man, Daniel; an’ I’ll never be happy again

until I've done my share to prove it," she said.

"'Tis just that will be so awful hard. Anyway I felt that the risk of a trial was too great to stand, if there was a chance to escape. And the chance offered. The lies I've told! But I needn't waste time with that. Keep quiet about my visit to-night. Ban't nobody's business but ours. A purty honeymoon, by God! All the same, 'tis better than none."

Minnie hastened to get the food; then, when she had brought it, he put out the light and flung the window open.

"Us must heed what may hap. They might come this way by chance, though there's little likelihood of it."

He listened, but there was no sound save the sigh of a distant stream and the stamp of the horse's hoofs at the door.

"To leave you here in this forsaken place!" he cried. "You mustn't stop. You shall not."

"But I shall, for 'tis so good as any other," she answered. "I've got to work for you while you are far off, Daniel. I've got to clear you; an' I will, God helping. What a woman can do, I'll do for 'e."

"An' more than any woman but you could do! I know right well that if truth is to come

to light 'twill be your brave heart finds it. You an' Sim. Trust him. He'll do what a friend may. He'll work for me with all his might."

"An' what will you do?" she asked.

"Make myself scarce," he answered. "'Tis all I can do for the present. No good arguing while the rope's round your neck. I can't prove I'm innocent, so 'tis vain stopping to do it. I'll get out of harm's way, if I can. I mean to get to Plymouth afore morning an' go down among the ships. Then I'll take the first job any man offers me, an' if my luck holds, I did ought to be in blue water to-morrow."

"They'll trace you by the horse if you ride."

"So they would, of course. 'Tis the horse I trust to help me again as he've helped to-night. Like enough, when you hear next about me, they'll tell you as I've been killed by the horse. But don't you feel no fear. I shall be to Plymouth very comfortable."

She ministered to him, and he ate and drank heartily.

"One hour I'll bide along wi' my own true love, then off I must go," said Daniel. "I've hit poor Gregory rather hard; but I hope he'll get over it. Anyway, it had to be done. Only you go on being yourself, Min, an' keep up your courage, an' fill your time working for me. The case is clear. Some man have shot Adam

Thorpe ; but he didn't shoot him with my gun, because my gun was in my own hand when Thorpe fell, an' I was a good few mile away. To be exact, I was getting pheasants for 'e in Westcombe woods at the time—you'll find 'em in the well ; an' I heard the shots fired at Middlecott quite clear, though I was five mile off. But the thing be to show that I was five mile off."

"And your gun, Daniel?"

"I put my gun back in the case in the next room to this long afore midnight yesterday," he said.

"Then 'twas fetched away after midnight?"

"Yes, it was ; an' if you can find the man as took my gun, then you'll find the man who killed the keeper."

"'Twill be the first thought an' prayer of my life to do it, Daniel."

"'An you will do it—if Sim don't," he prophesied.

Within an hour Daniel reluctantly prepared to leave his home.

"'Tis a damned shame I must go," he said ; "but I've no choice now. Only mind this, Minnie Sweetland. Don't you think you'm a widow to-morrow when they comes an' tells you so. If they bring my carcase to 'e, then believe it ; but they won't."

"Take care of yourself, Daniel," she answered, "for your life's my life. I'll only live an' think an' work an' pray for you, till you come homealong again."

"Trust me," he said. "You'm my star wheresoever I do go. Up or down, so long as I be alive, I'll have you first in thought, my own li'l wife. Nought shall ever come atween me an' you but my coffin-lid. An' well God knows it."

"Go," she said. "An' let me hear how you be faring so soon as you can."

"Be sure of that. If I daren't write to you, I'll write to Sim. But remember! it may be an awful long time, if I have to go across seas."

"Write to me—to me direct," she begged earnestly. "Send my letter through no other man or woman. 'Twill be my life's blood renewed to get it. An' I can wait; I can wait as patient as any stone. Time's nothing so long as we come together again some day. We've got our dear memories, an' they'll never grow dim, though we grow grey."

"Not the memory of this day an' night, that's brought the greatest ill an' the greatest joy into my life to once," he answered her. "Green for evermore 'twill be."

Then again and again they kissed, and Daniel Sweetland rode away.

At the top of the next dark hill he turned and looked back, but he saw nothing. Minnie had not lighted her lamp again. She stood and watched him vanish. Then she went to her bed in the dark and prayed brave prayers until the dawn broke.

CHAPTER VII

THE BAD SHIP "PEABODY"

DANIEL SWEETLAND had decided on his course of action before he bade his wife farewell. Now he rode back to Furnum Regis, found the King's Oven empty as he expected, and turned his horse's head to the south. He crossed the main road, struck down a saddle path, and presently approached Vitifer Mine. Here the land was cut and broken into wild chaos of old-time excavations and deep natural gulleys and fissures. The place was dangerous, for terrific disused shafts opened here, and a network of rails and posts marked the more perilous tracts and kept the cattle out. Sweetland knew this region well, and now, dismounting, he led his horse to a wide pit known as Wall Shaft Gully, and tethered it firmly where miners, going to their work, must see it on the following morning. An ancient adit lined with granite yawned below, and local report said that it was unfathomable. Two years before a man had accidentally destroyed himself by falling into it, and though the fact was known, the nature

of the place made it impossible to recover his corpse.

Now Daniel took a pencil and paper from his pocket. Then, under the waning moon, he wrote the words "Good-bye, all. Let Sim break it to my wife.—D. Sweetland." Next he took a stick, stuck it up, and set his message in a cleft of it; and lastly he kicked and broke the soil at the edge of the shaft, so that it should seem he had cast himself in with reluctance. That done, he set out for Plymouth at his best pace, consulted his watch, and saw that if all went well he might reach the shelter of the streets by four o'clock in the morning.

That information respecting his escape must be there before him, he knew. As soon as the police reached Princetown, telegrams would fly to Exeter and Plymouth and elsewhere. But Daniel trusted that early news would come from the Moor. Then, if once it was supposed that he had committed suicide, the severity of the search was certain to relax.

His estimate of the distance to be travelled proved incorrect, and the runaway found himself surprised by the first grey of morning long before he had reached the skirts of the town. He turned, therefore, into the deep woods that lie among those outlying fortresses which surround the great seaport, and near the neigh-

bourhood of Marsh Mills, where the river Plym runs by long, shining reaches to the sea, Daniel hid close under an overhanging bank beside the water. Here he was safe enough, and saw no sign of life but the trout that rose beneath him. The food that Minnie made him carry was soon gone, and another nightfall found Sweetland ravenous. At dusk he lowered himself to the river and drank his fill, but not until midnight was past did he leave his snug holt and set forth again.

By three o'clock on the following morning he was in Plymouth, and turned his steps straightway to the Barbican. For Daniel sought a ship. He had debated of all possibilities, and even thought of hiding upon the Moor and letting Minnie feed him by night, until the truth of Thorpe's murder came to be known ; but the futility of such a course was manifest. To intervene actively must be impossible for him without discovery ; he felt it wiser, therefore, to escape beyond reach of danger for the present. Then, once safe, he hoped to communicate with his friends and hear from them concerning their efforts to prove his innocence.

The Barbican grew out of dawn gradually, and its picturesqueness and venerable details stood clear cut in the light of morning. It

woke early, and Daniel hastened where a coffee-stall on wheels crept down to the quay from an alley-way that opened there. He was the first customer, and he made a mighty breakfast, to the satisfaction of the merchant. Daniel was cooling his third cup when other wayfarers joined him. Some were fishermen about to sail on the tide ; some were Spanish boys, just setting out on their rounds with ropes of onions ; some were sailors from the ships.

A thin, hatchet-faced man in jack-boots and a blue jersey attracted Daniel. He wore his hair quite long in oily ringlets ; gold gleamed in his ears ; his jaws were clean-shaven, and his teeth were yellow.

"Have any of you chaps seen a Judas-coloured man this morning?" he asked of the company. "His name's Jordan, and he carries a great red beard afore him, and the Lord knows where he's got to. Went off his ship last night and never came back."

A fisherman was able to give information.

"I seed the very man last night. He was drinking along with some pals and females at the 'Master Mariner'—that publichouse at the corner. He's got into trouble, mister."

"Of course, of course ; I might have knowed it. He's a man so fiery as his colour. Have they locked him up?"

“That I couldn’t tell you. There was a regular upstore an’ pewter mugs flying like birds. First a woman scratched the man’s face ; then three chaps went for him all at once. The police took him away, but whether he’s to the lock-up or the hospital I couldn’t tell ’e. One or t’other for sartain.”

The sailor with the earrings showed no great regret.

“Let him stop there, the cranky, spit-firing varmint. But we sail after midday on the tide, and the question is where am I going to pick up a carpenter’s mate between now and then?”

“What’s your ship?” asked Daniel Sweetland.

“The *Peabody*, bound for the West Indies, and maybe South America after.”

“How long will you be away from England?”

“Can’t say to a month. Might be twelve weeks, might be twenty ; but most like we shall be home by end of February.”

“I’ll come,” said Daniel. “I want a ship, an’ I want it quick.”

“D’you know your job?”

“Ess, fay ; an’ what I don’t know I’ll larn afore we’m off the Eddystone lighthouse.”

“Come on then,” answered the other. “I’m in luck seemingly. You’re all right — eh? Ban’t running away from anybody?”

"I'm running away from my wife," answered Daniel, frankly.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, well, that's a home affair—your business, not mine. Sometimes there's nought better than a bit of widowhood for females. You'll make friends when you go back, no doubt."

"Very likely we shall."

"There was one man shipped with me who told that story, and I thought no more of it at the time. But afterwards I found that the chap had murdered his missis afore he ran away from her. You haven't done that, I hope?"

"No, no—just left her for her good for the present," explained Daniel. "And who be you, if I may ax?"

"My name is James Bradley, and I'm mate of the *Peabody*," answered his companion. "I'll not deceive you. I'm offering you nothing very well worth having. The *Peabody's* an old tank steamer, and rotten as an over-ripe pear. Sometimes I think the rats will put their paws through her bottom afore long. A bad, under-engined, under-manned ship."

"Why do you sail in her then?"

"That's not here or there. I'm mate, and men will risk a lot for power. Besides, I'm a philosopher, if you know what that is, and I've

got a notion, picked up in the East, that what will happen will happen. If I'm going to be drowned, I shall be drowned. Therefore, by law an' logic, I'm as safe in the *Peabody* as I should be in a battleship. But perhaps your mind is not used to logic?"

"Never heard of it," said Daniel.

"I'll larn you," answered Mr Bradley. "There's the ship alongside that quay. I'll lay you never saw a uglier."

The *Peabody* was not an attractive craft, but Daniel had no eye for a ship and merely regarded the steamer as an ark of refuge until better days might dawn. She lay low in the water, had three naked, raking masts, and bluff bows. Her engines were placed right aft. The well of the ship was not five feet above the water-line.

Mr Bradley, ignorant of the fact that the new carpenter's mate had seldom seen a ship in his life, and never been upon one, supposed that Daniel was taking in the steamer with a sailor's eye.

"A better weather boat than you'd think, for all she's so low. Ten knots with a fair wind. We're taking out a mixed cargo and we shall bring back all sorts and probably cruise around on the South American coast till we can fill up somehow."

"What sort of a captain have you got?"

"A very good old man. Too good for most of us. A psalm-smiter, in fact."

"I'll come an' see the captain, an' have a bit more breakfast, if you've no objection," said Daniel.

"He won't be there. He's along with his wife and family at Devonport. He'll only come aboard an hour afore we sail. But I'm in command now. We'll sign you on right away. What sort of a sailor are you?"

"Never knowed what it was to be sea-sick in my life," said Daniel, laughing to himself at the joke.

"Lucky for you. The *Peabody* finds the weak spots in a man's system when she's in a beam sea—that I promise you. I'm always ill for a week after I've been ashore a fortnight. Here's Chips."

The man addressed as "Chips" was standing at the entrance of the forecastle as Bradley and Daniel crossed a gangway and arrived on the deck of the ship.

He came forward to the mate.

"Have 'e heard or seen aught of Jordan?" he asked.

"Seen nought; heard all I want to hear. He's either in hospital or police-station. There won't be time for him to come back now, even

if he wants to. Tell the boy to pack his kit-bag and send it ashore to the 'Master Mariner.' They'll know where he's been taken. And this man has come in his place. What's your name, my son?"

"Bob Bates."

"Come and eat your breakfast, Bob Bates," said the carpenter. "Then I'll find you plenty to do afore we sail."

"I'm a thought out of practice, but I'll soon get handy," answered Daniel.

"Where's your papers?" asked the mate.

"Haven't got none," answered the other.

"Old man will never take you without papers."

The carpenter, who liked the look of his new mate, intervened. "Leave that, Bradley. Cap'n will listen to me, if not to you. Seeing this man ships in such a hell of a hurry, 'twill be all right. Then, if he's the proper sort, old man will soon forget."

"You can pretend I'm a stowaway an' not find me till we're out to sea," suggested Daniel.

"No need, no need; 'twill be all right," answered the other.

Time proved that the carpenter of the *Peabody* was correct. His injured mate did not reappear, and in the hurry of sailing no questions were asked. That night, in a weak ship rolling

gunwales under, Sweetland made acquaintance with the ailment he had never known, and Mr Bradley, who found him under the light of an oil lamp in an alley-way, regarded the prostrate wreck of Daniel with gloomy triumph.

"I told you as this ship would twist your innards about a bit. I'm awful bad myself. Drink a pint of sea-water; 'tis the only thing to do. If it don't kill you, it cures you."

The landsman grunted inarticulately. He was thinking that to perish ashore, even with infamy, would be better than the dreadful death that now prepared to overtake him.

But after twenty-four hours the *Peabody* was ship-shape and panting solidly along on an even keel. Daniel quickly recovered, and what he lacked in knowledge he made up in power to learn and power to please. Chips, of course, discovered that his new mate was no carpenter. and Bradley also perceived that Daniel had never been to sea before. But your land-lubber, if he be made of the right stuff, will often get on with a ship's company better than a seasoned salt. Sweetland was unselfish, hard-working, and civil. The men liked him, and the captain liked him. He prospered and kept his own dark cares hidden.

To detail at length the life on shipboard is not necessary, since no events of importance

occurred to be chronicled, and within a few weeks of sailing, accident withdrew Sweetland from the *Peabody* for ever. The usual experience befell him; the wonders of the deep revealed themselves to him for the first time; but only one thing that the sea gave up interested Sweetland, and that chanced to be an English newspaper. It happened thus. When off the Azores on the Sunday after sailing, a big steamer overhauled the *Peabody*, went past her as if she was standing still, and in two hours was hull down again on the horizon.

"'Tis the *Don*," said Bradley. "One of the Royal Mail boats from Southampton for Barbados and Jamaica."

Sweetland frowned to himself and wondered how it came about that the vessel's name should be familiar to him. Then he remembered that it had entered his ear before the tragedy. Henry Vivian intended to sail by this ship. Doubtless he was on her now.

The liner passed within two hundred yards of the tramp. Then, just as she drew ahead, somebody pitched a newspaper over her taffrail into the water. It was crumpled up, and the sea being smooth, the journal floated, and a current drifted it across the bows of the *Peabody*. A man forward saw it, guessed that it contained later news than any on the ship, and

prepared to fish it up. Three sailors with lines were ready for the floating paper as it passed the side of the steamer, and the second angler secured it. It proved to be *The Times* of a date one day later than the sailing of the *Peabody*.

The journal was carefully dried and then, in turn, each man who cared to do so studied it at leisure.

For Daniel Sweetland it contained one highly interesting paragraph, and he smiled to see how successful his crude deception had proved.

The item of news may be reproduced, for it defines the supposed situation left behind by Sweetland, and fittingly closes this chapter of his life's story.

"THE TRAGEDY ON DARTMOOR

"A sensational sequel is reported to the arrest of the man Daniel Sweetland on his wedding day. It will be remembered that Sweetland, a notorious poacher, was suspected—on the evidence of his own gun—to have murdered a gamekeeper in the woods of Middlecott Court estate near the little town of Moretonhampstead, Devon. Three officers arrested him and started to convey him to Plymouth. But accident detained the party in the lonely central region of the Moor, and their horse falling lame, they spent some time at a solitary publichouse known as the Warren Inn. Here Sweetland, taking the police into his confidence, confessed to being an accomplice in the recent famous burglary at Westcombe—the

seat of the Giffards not far distant from Middlecott Court. . . ."

The journal, after giving a very accurate account of all that had happened at Furnum Regis, proceeded—

"The hoodwinked officers lost no time in reaching Princetown, and from the convict establishment at that village, telegraphic communication was set up with the neighbouring districts. But early morning brought the sequel to the incident, for at dawn certain labourers proceeding to their work in Vitifer Mine, some few miles from the King's Oven, discovered the horse on which Sweetland had ridden off. It was tethered in the midst of a wild and savage region full of old workings, where lie some tremendous and unfathomable shafts, sunk in past years but long deserted. Here the unfortunate poacher appears to have deliberately taken his own life, for at the head of the Wall Shaft Gully—a famous chasm which has already claimed human victims in the past—a stake was discovered with a letter fastened to the top of it. The words inscribed thereon ran as follows:—'*Good-bye all. Let Sim break news to my wife.—D. Sweetland.*' The writing bears traces of great agitation, but those familiar with Sweetland's penmanship are prepared to swear that these pathetic syllables were actually written by him. Absolute proof, however, is impossible, since the profound depths of the Wall Shaft Gully cannot be entered. In the case of an accident during 1883, when a shepherd was seen to fall in, all efforts to recover his body proved fruitless, owing to the fact that foul air is encountered at a depth of

about one hundred yards beneath the surface of the ground. The man 'Sim' alluded to in the poacher's last message is a footman at Middlecott Court, and appears to have been Sweetland's only friend. We understand that he has carried out the trust imparted to him by his ill-fated companion. Search at the King's Oven has proved unavailing. It is clear that no treasure of any kind was secreted there."

"That's all right," said Daniel. "Now the sooner I get back to help 'em find out who killed Thorpe, the better. If I'd known that 'twould all work out so suent an' easy, I'd not have gone at all. If it weren't for the thought of Minnie an' mother, I could laugh."

CHAPTER VIII

MR SIM TELLS A LIE

THOUGH Daniel had expressly asked Minnie to tell his friend Titus Sim that he was not at the bottom of Wall Shaft Gully but far away in present safety, the wanderer's wife did no such thing. She would not trust herself to associate Sim with her husband's tragic misfortune; for she could not yet feel certainty that the footman was all he pretended and declared. His conduct after Sweetland's disappearance proved exemplary. He fulfilled the mission left behind by Daniel with all possible tact and judgment. Alone he visited Minnie, and broke the news to her that she was a widow. But she surprised him more than he dismayed her.

"I pray that you an' everybody be mistaken, Mr Sim," she said. "I hope my Daniel's not at the bottom of that awful place. But whether his days are over an' he lies there, or whether he's safe an' beyond the reach of those who want to take him, my part is the same. I'll never rest till I've done all a faithful wife can do to clear his memory of this wicked thing.

You know so well as I do that he was an innocent man."

"Yes, and trust me to prove him so, if wit and hard work can do it."

"Those who loved him must labour to clear him. Let them who want my good word an' good-will right Daniel. 'Tis the only way to my heart, an' I don't care who knows it."

Perhaps those words were the cleverest that Minnie had ever uttered. At any rate, they produced a profound effect on Titus Sim. He pondered deeply before replying; then he nodded thoughtfully to himself more than once.

"'Tis the great task before us all; to make his memory sweet. Rest sure enough that I'll do my share," he promised.

But Minnie Sweetland found her dislike of Sim not lessened by his correct attitude during these dark and troubled days. She avoided him when possible. She kept the secret of her husband's flight very close. Indeed, two living souls alone knew it beside Minnie, and they were her husband's parents. Dan need have been in small concern for his mother, because on the morning after the poacher's flight Minnie had private speech with the Sweetlands, and made them understand the truth. The woman was wise, and perceiving that her son's salvation probably hung upon this secret, she kept

it. Matthew Sweetland also preserved silence. His melancholy was profound, and only Minnie had any power to lift him out of it. Her energy and determination deeply impressed him; her absolute belief and trust in her husband's honour put life into him. He told her all that he knew concerning the death of Adam Thorpe, and promised to take her to the scene of the outrage that she might study it for herself.

"If only we can prove that he had no hand in it," said Matthew. "But there, 'tis vain to hope so—look which way you will. If he was innocent, why for did he run?"

"Innocent men have done so for nought but terror," she answered.

"Maybe; but not Daniel. He was never afeared. No—no; he's gone with blood on his hands. 'Twill never be known till Judgment Day. Then the record will be cried from the Book."

"Why for shouldn't us believe him?" she asked. "He never told me a lie in his life. Can you call home that you ever caught him in one?"

But the father refused to argue.

"He may have throwed himself down Wall Shaft Gully for all he told you he would not. And no man would have taken on that dreadful death if he wasn't in fear of a dreadfuller.

However, you can come to the place an' welcome. I'll show you where one rogue got me down an' nearly hammered the life out of me ; an' I'll show you where the other man let moonlight into poor Thorpe. The detectives have tramped every yard of the ground, but they found nothing good or bad. The man or woman as can prove my son innocent will have my blessing, I promise you, though too well I know he's guilty. I've heard him threaten Thorpe myself."

In process of time, therefore, Minnie visited the coverts of Middlecott Court and traversed the exact ground where Daniel was supposed to have destroyed Adam Thorpe. Many other more highly trained observers had done the like ; but public interest in the affair perished with Sweetland's supposed suicide ; and even the police when the events of Furnum Regis and Wall Shaft Gully came to their ears, pursued their operations at Middlecott Lower Hundred and elsewhere with less ardour. Their labours threw no light upon the past ; nor could they find Daniel's accomplice. Mr Sweetland swore to a second poacher ; for one man fought with him and broke his finger, while the other fired on Thorpe ; but both rascals had worn masks, and no trace of either appeared after the affray, excepting only the gun—Henry Vivian's gift to Daniel.

Proceedings presently terminated tamely enough, and it was not until a fortnight after the last detective had left Middlecott that Minnie with her father-in-law visited the theatre of Thorpe's death.

But they took a detour, for Sweetland had fresh troubles upon his hands.

"We'll go by Flint Stone Quarry in the east woods," he said, "for there it was that more birds were killed last night. You'd think the anointed ruffians had done enough; but they be at it still. 'Twas a great roosting-place—very thick and warm, with snug shelter from north and east. They might have killed scores o' dozens for all me an' the new keeper could do. For all I know, they did. Of course when us got there all was silent as the grave; but Thomas went again first thing this morning and found one dead bird an' one lamed but living, stuck in a tree fork. An' there was feathers everywhere an' marks of feet. Ten pounds worth of birds at least they took."

The girl listened quietly.

"Maybe 'tis the old hands, father?"

"Or new ones, as have larned their wicked tricks from my dead son."

"I shall never love you while you say these things against Daniel."

The keeper did not answer. He was survey-

ing the glaring evidence of another poaching raid. A stone quarry stood in the centre of heavy woods here, and gleamed white with flint and yellow with gravel where it had been gouged out of the hillside. All round it there crowded trees, and an undergrowth of juniper and rhododendron grew to the forehead of the cleft.

"Look!" said Matthew Sweetland. "The scamps comed down there; an' one slipped, I reckon. See how the soil be tore away. I lay he fell pretty heavy. 'Twas this here more¹ caught his foot an' over he comed. Here's feathers an' blood where he fell."

Minnie stood by her father-in-law and examined the marks he indicated. It was clear that some heavy body had crashed over the edge of the quarry and fallen six feet into a bed of fern beneath. While the man examined the ground, Minnie picked up a feather or two, regarded the clotted blood beneath, and wondered whether it came from a dead pheasant or a living poacher. She peeped about among the fern, then started, bent down, picked up a small object and put it into her pocket quickly. When the keeper returned she was looking listlessly at the wound on the quarry.

"The man must have fallen heavy, if 'twas a man," she said.

¹ *More*: a tree root.

"The Dowl looks arter his own," answered Mr Sweetland. "'Twould have broke the neck of any honest chap, no doubt."

They proceeded a mile into the sweet recesses of the woods. Then Minnie stood on the scene of the murder and regarded, not without emotion, the spot where her husband was declared to have killed Adam Thorpe.

His father gloomily pointed out the place where Daniel's gun had been discovered by Titus Sim.

"It have aged the poor wretch twenty year," he said. "Sim be a hang-dog creature now, an' slinks past me as though he was to blame for Dan's downfall. But I won't have that. He only done his duty. There was the gun, an' he had to show it. 'Tis all summed up in that. How did it come to be there, if my son was not? An' why for did he run away or else kill himself, if he had the power to prove himself guiltless? Who can answer those questions?"

"'Tis for me to do it," replied Minnie. "An' right's my side, father. If he was dead, 'tis for me to live to right his memory; but he be living, 'tis for me to clear him more than ever, so that he may come back an' stand afore your face again like an honest man."

"Never—never," he answered. "That's

where us picked up Thorpe ; an' that's where the gun was ; an' there, alongside that fallen tree in the brambles, was the spot where t'other blackguard got me down an' nearly beat the life out of me."

The girl looked round about her and nodded.

"Now you go about your business, for I lay this not a pleasant place to you," she said. "I'll just peep around, if you please."

"There's no eyes of all them that have searched here was so bright as yours, my dear ; but think twice afore you waste your time here. 'Tis not likely you'll find aught ; an' if you find anything more than others have found, 'tis most certain to be sorrow."

"I don't think it. My heart tells me as there be that hid here as will pay for finding. I've felt it all along, an' never more than to-day."

"Seek then, an' if you can find my son's innocence, me an' his mother will bless you for evermore, when us wakes and when us lies down. You've my leave to come here as often as you will, an' I'll tell Thomas an' t'others that you'm free of the woods. Your way home along is by the path yonder. 'Twill fetch 'e out 'pon the side of Hameldon ; then to the high road ban't above a mile."

The old man left her, and Minnie, sitting

down upon the fallen tree which he had pointed out, made a quiet and systematic plan of search. But her thoughts were divided between this present site and that whereon she had stood half-an-hour earlier. Now she mapped out the region of the fray, and began her work where Daniel's gun had been discovered by Titus Sim. She took a reel of stout white thread from her pocket and with sticks marked out a space of three square yards. Then yard by yard she went over the ground, lifting every leaf and examining every inch of grass and soil. Not an atom of ground escaped this most laborious scrutiny. With immense patience and care she pursued the task, and at the end of three hours, in the silent heart of the woods, she had inspected six square yards. Nothing rewarded the examination: but only a very trifling tract out of that involved was yet inspected, and Minnie, having carefully marked the portion investigated, left Middlecott Lower Hundred and prepared to return home.

She still lived at Hangman's Hut, and the fifty pounds with which Daniel had started life promised to keep her there until time should pass and news of her husband reach her. Already the wonder waned and folks began to talk of the "widow Sweetland" and ask each other how long she must in decency remain alone

before taking another husband. That Titus Sim would be the man few doubted. He often visited her, and he strove valiantly in many directions to discover the secret of Thorpe's death. Sometimes he grew elated at the shadow of a clue ; then, again, he became cast down as the hope of explanation vanished and the problem evaded him.

Three nights after Minnie's first great search, Mr Sim called upon her. Of late he had seen her not seldom, because the family at Middlecott was away and the servants consequently enjoyed unusual leisure.

Titus found Mrs Beer with her neighbour, for the innkeeper's wife often spent an evening hour at the lonely girl's cottage, and Mr Beer also would occasionally run over if business was quiet. But his motives were selfish, for Minnie proved a good listener, and though she did not praise the fat man's poetry, she was always prepared to give it respectful hearing.

The footman knocked and entered, according to his custom ; then he sat by the fire and stretched his gaitered legs to the blaze.

"A rough night," he said. "I had a regular fight with the wind coming up over the heath ; but you'm snug enough seemingly. I do welcome these days when our people are away ;

for they give me a chance to be in the air. Sometimes I'm sore tempted to throw up this life and get out-of-door work again."

"You wasn't meant for a flunkey, I'm sure," declared Mrs Beer. "I never can think 'tis a very dignified calling for a grown man, though of course the quality must have 'em."

"You are almost so fond of the woods and the wild things as my Daniel is," declared Minnie.

"True for you," he answered. "True for you, Mrs Sweetland."

"I dare say you get a breath of the woods now an' again while the folks are away?"

"All I can. These stirring times make me long to be a gamekeeper—just like when the country goes to war, we men all want to be soldiers. I'm afraid poor old Sweetland gets beyond his work. There's been more trouble in the preserves since Sir Reginald went to Scotland."

This information apparently reminded the mistress of Hangman's Hut that she had offered Titus no hospitality.

"I'll draw some cider for 'e. 'Tis all I've got. Dan promised never to drink nought else after we was married. An' if you want for to smoke, please do it."

The footman pulled out a pouch of tobacco

and a pipe from his pocket; as he did so he groaned.

"What's the matter?" inquired Mrs Beer. "That's the noise my old man makes in his sleep when the rheumatics be at him."

"My side. I had a cruel dig in the ribs two days ago. Slipped and fell on the cellar stairs with a scuttle o' coals. I thought I'd broke every bone in my body. And a pang shoots through an' through my side yet when I move my right arm. But 'tis better than 'twas.

Minnie expressed active regret and brought Mr Sim a cushion for his back. His bright eyes looked round the little comfortable kitchen hungrily. He already pictured the time when he might fill a dead man's shoes, for he was among the many who believed that Daniel Sweetland had in reality perished and would be heard of no more. Minnie never undeceived him.

Now the mistress of Hangman's Hut poured her visitor out his drink, then sat and watched the tobacco smoke curl from his lips. Presently she spoke.

"Do you still use that wooden pipe what my Dan gived 'e? 'Twas cut very cunning in the shape of a fox's mask wi' li'l black beads for eyes. I should like to think as you smoke it

sometimes an' remember him as gived it to you."

"And so I do. 'Tis my best pipe—for great occasions only. There's nought belongs to me I treasure more. I had it betwixt my teeth only this morning."

The woman looked at him and nodded gravely. There was nothing in her face that showed his speech particularly interested her. And yet, in wide ignorance of facts, Sim had spoken words that might some day lead to his discomfiture and ruin. For he had lied, and Mrs Sweetland knew it.

He drank, talked on and suggested in his speech and ideas a man of simple rectitude and honourable mind. His admiration for Minnie he made no attempt to conceal. It presently fired Mrs Beer into a rather personal remark.

"Lord! what a couple you'd make!" she said, eying them. "I do hope, to say it without rudeness, as you'll see your way, my dear; for Titus here be cut out for you; an' everybody be of the same opinion. When a man's saved enough to open a publichouse, that man's a right to look high for his partner, and he has a right to the respect of us females. Take the case of my Beer. He waited, so patient as Job, till the critical cash was to his name in the Bank

at Moreton. Then he flinged over service as gardener up to Archerton and lifted his eyes to me; but not afore he'd got three figures to his name. An' we all know that Mr Sim be a very snug man."

"I won't deny it," said Titus. "'Twould be idle to do so. I am a snug man as young men go. The guests at Middlecott are generous, and five pound notes soon mount up. But we musn't talk of that. Mrs Sweetland hopes that my poor friend and her dear husband be still in the land of the living. And, though it cuts the ground from beneath me, I hope so too. Have 'e heard 'bout drunkard Parkinson? They say he's not likely to get over his last bout. Now there's a man famed for poaching since his childhood, and as clever at it as any chap ever I heard of. It strikes me that he knows a lot more than his fellow creatures have heard him speak. Anyway, I'm going to see him to-morrow, if he's well enough to see me. He's not above a bit of sport by night still, though I guess he's shot his last bird now, poor chap! Put a gun in that man's hand, and he is sober in a minute. 'Tis an instinct with him."

Minnie listened and said nothing. She appeared to be working on a piece of red flannel, but in reality her mind and attention were elsewhere. She had private reasons for a close

personal scrutiny of Titus, and now, from under veiled lids, observed his every action, his dress, his speech.

The man clearly endured physical pain from time to time. He moved his right shoulder gingerly and occasionally, forgetting it, puckered his mouth into the expressions of suffering, when a twinge reminded him of his accident. He was clad in an old shooting jacket and breeches, the gift of one of his master's guests at the end of a shooting season. One leg was torn and the rent had been carefully drawn together. His gaiters were fastened with yellow horn buttons; but upon the right leg a button was missing. It had, however, been replaced with a black one.

Sim smoked and finished his cider; then he loaded his pipe again, talked ten minutes longer and prepared to depart.

"I was forgetting," he said. "Mrs Sweetland, at the lodge, sent a special message by me. She wants for you to come down and take supper along with her to-morrow. And she was so kind as to ask me also. And I said as I would do it and be proud to see you home after, if agreeable to you."

"I'll come gladly. I shall be at Moreton to-morrow. My fowls have begun to lay finely, an' I hope to have a dozen eggs for market."

"And may I see you home after?"

"If you've a mind to, though there's no need—a married woman like me."

"You'm so brave. Good-night—good-night. See how the moon is shining on the fog-banks. There'll come rain before morning, for the wind's fallen a lot already."

He departed, and soon afterwards Mrs Beer also returned to her home. Then Minnie tidied up the kitchen, brought in from his kennel her sole companion—a great yellow mongrel dog, loved of Daniel—and then locked the door.

Next she turned out from a drawer in the kitchen table a piece of brown wood and examined it very closely. It was the bowl of a pipe broken roughly from the stem. The fragment had been carved to represent a fox's mask, and upon the bottom of it were cut in small letters "T.S. from D.S." Minnie Sweetland collected some of the shreds of Mr Sim's tobacco and compared it with that still pressed into the broken pipe. Thus, while the footman walked home well satisfied with the progress of events, and full of dreams for his future prosperity, she upon whom it rested had made a remarkable discovery. That Titus Sim was involved in the murder of Thorpe, Minnie could not guess or prove; but that he was implicated in the recent raid—that it was, in fact, Sim who

had fallen in the quarry—it seemed impossible to doubt.

The young woman's first thought was to tell her father-in-law upon the following day. But she abandoned the idea. "I'll go on alone," she said to herself. "My Dan shall have none to thank but me. I'll prove afore all the world that he told the truth ; an' maybe I'll live to bring the truth to light. An' if there's danger in it, let the danger fall on me. I never was afeared of a human an' never will be, please God."

CHAPTER IX

IN MIDDLECOTT LOWER HUNDRED

AT this juncture it is enough to relate of Titus Sim that he honestly believed his old friend was dead, and hoped with all his heart to marry the widow. With no little self-control he concealed his ambitions, but the fact that others saw the propriety of the match impressed him, and since not a few openly held that he might fittingly wed the young wife, he began to sound Minnie herself upon the question.

There came a day after Christmas when Titus did groom's work and rode with a message from his master to Two Bridges, nigh Princetown. He pulled up his horse on the return journey and stopped to drink at the Warren Inn. Mr Beer was in the bar alone, and it happened that he touched the matter nearest the other's heart.

"Seeing we'm without company for the minute," said Johnny, "I can read 'e a bit of my last verses, Sim; an' though you ban't addicted to poetry, yet you'll do well to listen patient, for the matter has to do with you in a

manner of speaking, though 'tis poetry. In fact, you be mentioned by name."

The footman, who never quarrelled with any man, pretended deep interest, and Johnny drew a piece of foolscap from his pocket, unrolled it, set a glass on the top, then spread out the sheet and read with that deliberate and loving unction peculiar to one who recites his own composition.

"'Tis the whole tragedy of two young, youthful lives told in a rhyme," he explained. "I've took the tale so far as it has got like. Now 'tis for you to make history, so as I can write the next verses."

Then the poet began :—

"Oh, 'twas a direful business sure
When out come Sweetland from church door
And, almost afore he'd kissed his wife,
To find himself tried for his dear life.
Then up he sprang ; policemen three
They wasn't half so spry as he.
And even Corder, as comed from Plym-
Mouth, he couldn't get quits with him.

But cruel sad and wisht the tale,
For Daniel from this mortal vale
Did take his leave ; but there's no mirth
Down in the bowels of the earth,
Where he be now—excuse my groans,
For fitches and weasles do pick his bones.
And that young woman sweet and slim,
She never was no wife for him.

Though she have lost her maiden name,
She'm just a maiden all the same.
And Sweetland's her name and sweet's her nature—
So sweet as any mortal creature.
And here, upon the Moor so desolate,
She lives, like a bird as have lost its mate.

All in a lonesome nest she bides ;
Near by a little old river glides ;
And Dan will never come no more, he
Is in the Land of eternal glory.
For that I swear, who pens this verse,
Though some was better and some was worse,
Yet never would that straight young Dan
Have shed the blood of any man.
But now who shall come forth and say,
'I'll take this poor young girl away
And marry her and give her joy
To atone for her unfortunate boy ?'
I ask the question far and near,
And answer comes as clear as clear :
For Titus Sim, he loved her well,
And nothing but death true love shall quell.
And therefore I do hope afore long
He will make good this humble song ;
And no chap will be happier than Titus Sim
If Minnie Sweetland will live along with him."

"There!" said Mr Beer. "Every rhyme out of my own head. An' what d'you think of it?"

"'Tis very fine poetry, and true, which all poetry is not to my certain knowledge," answered Titus. "I have chances to dip into

gentlefolks' books, and the nonsensical rhymes they have in 'em would much surprise you. But here's rhyme and reason both, I'm sure. 'Tis a beautiful poem, an' I should be very much obliged for a copy."

"If 'twill fire you on to your duty, you shall have it; an' if she takes you, I'll add a bit to it," said Mr Beer. "If you think in rhyme as I often do," he added, "'tis fifty pounds against a bag of nuts, that you frequently hit on a bit of wisdom. I've often been mazed at my own cleverness. But I never surprise my wife. If I found out a way of turning moor-stone into solid gold, she'd merely say that she knowed all along 'twas in me to do it. Therefore I hope you'll take the hint like a man, an' offer marriage so soon as you can. You've got the good wishes of the parish behind you in the adventure; an' that's half the battle, no doubt."

"I'm thinking it's too soon," said Titus. "Between you and me, Mr Beer, 'tis my dream and hope to have her, but time must pass. In the upper circles they wait a year afore they approach a bereft female, and though I needn't be asked to keep off it so long as that, still three months isn't enough, I'm afraid. She was very fond of Dan, remember."

"I suppose three months is not enough, as you say," admitted Johnny, "especially as she

won't have it that he's dead. There's a crack-brained thought in her poor young heart that Daniel didn't make away with himself at all ; an' of course as the ashes of the poor chap will never be seen by mortal eye until the last Trump, 'tis impossible to prove she's wrong. For my part I've said that I reckon he's dead ; but, at the same time, I never shall know why he made away with himself until we stand face to face beyond the grave. Then that will be the fust question I ax the man. 'Whatever did 'e do such a terrible rash thing for, Dan?' I shall ax him as we meet in a golden street."

"I wish I could think with you that he didn't do it—shoot Thorpe I mean ; but I'm only too sure of it. What I believe is this : that Rix Parkinson and Dan did the job between them, and that poor Dan shot the underkeeper while Parkinson tried to knock the life out of Dan's father. Of course Rix denied it when I taxed him. However, truth will out—at Doomsday, if not before, an', be it as it will, there's no reason why I shouldn't ask the girl I love to marry me now she's free to. I'll do it come the springtime, if not before."

Mr Beer applauded the resolve.

"I'm sure right an' law be both your side.

The Church likewise, for that matter. Parson never would hold Minnie to that marriage. She'm free, no doubt. What you've got to do be to convince her loving mind that Daniel be in glory, as my verses say; then she'll let un bide an' turn her attention to you, if she's so wise as I think. Shall you live upalong to Hangman's Hut if she takes you?"

"No, I sha'n't. I mean to go to Moreton. I've a thought to take a little shop there, if she likes the idea."

"Better try for a public. Drink be a more certain support than food. If I don't know Moreton men, who should? I tell you that they put bread second to beer every day of the year. I made a rhyme about it that they wrote up in Sam Merritt's bar. If you like—?"

"Not now, master," said Titus. "Though I'll wager 'tis a very clever rhyme, if you made it. And I'll keep in mind all you've said. Now I must get going, else I'll be late for dinner."

Sim rode off, and it chanced, as the dimpsy light faded and the brief splendour of winter sunset lighted the west, that he met young Mrs Sweetland returning home. Minnie was riding a pony which Mr Beer lent her when she wanted it. She had been at Middlecott

Lodge and in the coverts also, for her search was not relaxed, and, when opportunity offered, she continued it.

Little remained to be done. That day she had paid her eighteenth visit to the spot where Thorpe fell; and, for the first time since the beginning of the search, the girl believed herself rewarded. Most laborious and faithful had been her scrutiny. She told herself that to leave a twig unturned might be to lose the chance of re-establishing her husband's good repute. She toiled with a patience only possible to a woman; and now, while but three or four more yards remained to be searched, a significant fragment came to the light. Yet it was not near the spot where Daniel's gun had been discovered. That tract, despite a survey microscopical in its minuteness, yielded her nothing but a flake of flint. The arrow-head, for such it was, had told an antiquary of some Danmonian warrior from neolithic days; but to Minnie Sweetland it meant nothing, and she threw it aside without interest. Then, where Matthew Sweetland had suffered his cruel beating, the searcher came upon a yellow horn button. It reminded her instantly of Sim's leathern gaiters, and she stood silent in the peace of the woods and stared before her. Thus it seemed that her husband's

closest, dearest friend was identified with the spot of the murder. But even in the flush of discovery the young woman perceived how slight and vain was such a clue unsupported. If the button was Titus Sim's, it proved nothing against him, since all men knew that he had been early on the scene of the fray. But her heart leapt, though her head warned it, and she left the forest full of hope renewed.

Returning from this discovery, Minnie met Sim. Then they pulled up their horses and spoke together.

"I do wish you'd come down off the Moor to live, Mrs Sweetland. 'Tis much too cold and lonely for a female upalong these winter days."

"I like it. 'Tis a stern life an' keeps a body patient. You've got to fight a bit wi' nature. It makes a woman brave to have to do that. Last night the foxes got to my fowels an' killed three of 'em."

"I'm sorry, indeed!"

"'Twill larn me to be wiser."

"To think what it is to be a few miles nearer the sun! At least, I suppose 'tis that. They've heard from Mr Henry. Sir Reginald was reading out a lot of his letter at luncheon to-day. Such a place as that Tobago be! All palm-trees, and lofty mountains, and flowers,

and birds and butterflies, and sweltering sunshine, and niggers, and cocoanuts and sugar-cane. A different world, if words mean anything. Mr Henry has a pretty pen seemingly. I wish to God I'd been educated and could write so easy and flowing. As to the overseer of the estates, I didn't hear about that. 'Twas only a bit here and there Sir Reginald read out to her ladyship."

"Have they heard anything 'bout the pheasant thieves?"

"Not a syllable. Drunkard Parkinson swears on his oath he had no hand in it, though for my part I suspect him. And what d'you think? Matthew Sweetland was at me only yesterday to throw up my indoor work and turn keeper again! He knows I understand the work almost so well as Dan himself did. But I've got my ideas. It all depends on—on other parties what I do. I've told the old man that he must wait for my answer till next Midsummer-day."

"He's always praising you an' wishing how my Daniel had been more like you."

"No, no! I wasn't a patch on Daniel. Still, I know the outdoor work and love it, too!"

Minnie thought of her button.

"You'd want a wife then. A gamekeeper's life is a hard one. I suppose if you do that,

you'll take the north cottage and Thomas will get warning?"

"Yes—I should have his place; he's not much good. But as to a wife—well, if you ask me, I think a keeper's better without one. Men will talk to their wives; an' women will talk again to other women. They can't help it. A man whose business 'tis to keep secrets and run the chance of sudden death had better bide single. So it depends—as I told you just now—'pon other parties. Come next Midsummer, I shall ask a certain party a certain question; and if the answer is 'Yes,' there'll be no game-keeping for me; and if the answer is 'No'—well, I'd rather not think of that. There come times in his life when a strong man can't take 'No' for an answer."

Minnie sat on her pony with one hand in her pocket. She fingered the horn button and spoke.

"You want somebody to look after you. A girl's eyes be sharp where she takes an interest. I wonder your master have never called you to account for that black button on your gaiter. 'Tis very untidy. If you was an outdoor man, you'd never dare to go about like that."

"Quite right," he admitted. "To think your sharp eyes have seen—but what don't they see—even to a button? It do make me

feel proud all the same, that you can have bestowed the least thought on such a thing."

"I caught sight of it some time ago. If you remind me one day, I'll sew a yellow one on for 'e. I've got one. 'Twill match t'others an' look more vitty than that black one."

"I'm afeard it won't match the others, my dear, for they'm notched around the edge and be peculiar. But your button will be more to me than all the rest, and if 'tis yellow in colour, 'twill pass very well; and thank you kindly for the thought."

"Next time you come up then?"

"That will be Sunday night, if I may."

She nodded.

"Good-night, and bless you for your kind words," said Mr Sim very fervently.

"Good-night," she answered, and went her way.

No definite course of action had prompted her to this strange offer. Her only wish was to get a closer view of the gaiter and compare the button she had found with those upon it. Now, as she rode on, a thousand plans passed through her mind, but not one pleased her, and she began doubtfully to speculate upon the necessity of seeking help in this enterprise. The danger grew. Let Sim once suspect, and she could not guess the result. If he had him-

self destroyed the keeper and in cold blood plotted the subsequent destruction of Daniel Sweetland, then he would stick at nothing. Minnie very clearly perceived the necessity for caution. She also saw the direction in which Sim's thoughts were turning. That he would ask her to marry him when Midsummer came was certain. She only hoped that, long before summer returned, the truth might have dawned upon her darkness and her husband be by her side again.

Daniel was in her thoughts and her young heart yearned for him as she returned to her lonely dwelling. Then, as if to answer the longing, a great thing greeted her and the day closed in splendour brighter than any sunset light.

Mr Beer was waiting for the pony when Minnie arrived at the Warren Inn, and she remarked, despite the gloaming, that his mouth was full of news.

"Wonders never cease, but be on the increase," he began. "An' well you know that when I break out into poetry I've generally got something on my mind. Well, so I have. Onlight from your horse an' I'll give 'e a present. What could be better than a post-man's letter? An' from foreign parts, if you'll believe me, though I didn't know, my dear, as you'd got friends in the distance."

"Dan," she said. "'Tis Dan—my heart says it."

"Now don't think that, my poor maiden. I wish it was. But there ban't no letter-writing in the grave. A man neither sends nor receives 'em in the pit. An' 'tis not the worst thing as you can say for death that it puts you beyond reach of the penny post—not to name telegrams. You must make up your mind that Daniel be in the better land with saints an' angels grand. This here is from the West Indies where the rum comes from; an' if the place be as comforting as the drink, then I make no doubt people do very well there. For rum punch is a glorious brew to make the heart and liver new. But, if you ax me, this letter is from Mr Henry, who be in them parts. He was a close friend of Dan's; an' his was the gun that done the dreadful deed when death to Adam Thorpe did speed—Lord! how full I be of rhyme to-night! So, very like, he's written in his gentlemanly way to comfort you."

Minnie's bosom panted, and she put her hand upon it to hide the swift rise and fall. Right well she knew that Mr Beer was wrong, and though the superscription of the letter spread in a scrawling hand quite unlike Daniel's yet her heart saw through the envelope and she felt that the letter came from her husband.

"Let me have it," she said. "I'll tell you what's to tell to-morrow."

"Why not read it now?" he asked as he handed the letter to her.

"Time enough. Now take the pony, an' thank you, an' good-night."

Soon she was alone, but Minnie ate no supper that night, for another sort of feast awaited her. She read the long letter thrice from end to end; then, finding that the hour was nine o'clock, and the fireless cottage had grown very cold, she went to bed, and read the letter three times more by candle light. After that the candle suddenly went out, so she cuddled her soft bosom to the pages and slept with them against a happy heart.

CHAPTER X

DAN'S LETTER

“MY OWN, DEAR, PRETTY-EYED WIFE,—Here I be so safe as you could wish, with many a mile o’ salt water betwixt me and them as would harm me. A mighty lot of terrible strange things I’ve seed ; but first I must say as I got to Plymouth all right and met a chap as wanted a sailorman. He took me, because he couldn’t get a better, and we sailed out of Plymouth on the very next tide. My ship be called the *Peabody*. She’s a steamer—not much to look at and a poor one to go ; but here we are anyway, and I be writing to you from Tobago—an island in the West Indies, where us get brown sugar and cocoanuts and such like foreign contrivances.

“I’ll begin at the beginning, well knowing how you like for things to be all in order and ship-shape as we say. Well, the food’s cruel bad and the ship’s under-manned and under-engined, but we’m just on the windy side of the law, I believe, which is all you can expect from a tramp like the *Peabody*. The old man (Skipper) is a very good sort and everybody likes him ; also the

mate; likewise the bosun. Everything's all right, in fact, except the grub and the engines. I be the carpenter's mate.

“Us seed a good few wonders coming out over, but it blowed a bit off the Azores (which you can find in father's big map of the world), and we took it green. By which I mean this vessel shipped solid waves over her bows and we had to slow down, else we'd have gone down. The engines be good for nought in a head wind. But we got to Barbados at last, and I find 'tis called Bim for shortness. In the dimpsy light us fetched it, but out here twilight turns to night while the clock's striking, and afore we cast anchor 'twas dark and the island lying like a sea monster with a red light on his nose and a white on his tail—lighthouses I mean. Bridgetown it was where us landed part of our cargo—a place with windmills 'pon it and tilled land and miles of stuff, as made me think of home, so green it was; but 'tis sugar-cane when you gets up to it. We didn't bide in Carlisle Bay long, else I'd have wrote from there, but we was so terrible busy I hadn't but one chance to land. The folks here be every colour you could name between white and black, through all manner of shades of snuff colour, and butter colour, and putty colour, and peat colour. Cheerful, lazy devils, as like to laugh

and smoke and chew sugar-cane all day. But they properly hate work. Reckless mongrels, I should say they was; but in Bim a man don't have any show unless he've got a touch of the tar-brush as they say. That means nigger blood. Such a way as they tell! I never heard English spoke so comic in all my born days. Their clothes be built for ventilation mostly, and I never seed such a show of rags. Barbados is made of coral, but t'other islands are volcanoes, and they've a nasty way of going off when you least count upon it. From Carlisle Bay you can see white houses under wooden tiles all scorched grey by the sun heat, and in the streets a great crowd goes up and down in the blazing air and shining dust. Such a noise and clatter I never did hear. Mules squealing, bells ringing, bands playing, niggers bawling. The women all wear white dresses and gay turbans. They'm amazing straight in the back, owing to carrying all their goods 'pon top their heads. They sell cocoanuts, cane, pineapples, oranges, limes, mangoes, yams, pickles, and Lord knows what beside. They stride out beautiful owing to their short petticoats, but their mouths be a caution. The children look like little chocolate dolls, and much you'd love 'em. The policemen all be dressed in white. They fancy themselves an awful lot.

The pigs run about the streets and be for all the world like greyhounds (what we call long-dogs to home). The climate's that fiery that you'll never get no stock properly fatted in it. But you don't feel no call for much red meat. We got fresh water and green stuff aboard here, and how I wish I could have sent you my dinner yesterday. I had flying-fish and sweet potatoes and green-skinned oranges, red as gold inside, and many other fine things as would make your little mouth water to hear tell about. But the mangoes is what I like best, though they do say out here they be no better than a bit of tow dipped in turps. Ban't true, I assure 'e. I got off for two hour just afore we set sail, and went into the country, tramping round to see what I could see. And if I didn't come across a great mango tree as 'peared to me to be just a foreign, wild tree alongside the high road. Well, I seed the fruit in it, an' thinks I, 'twill be a fine thing for the ship.' So up I goes, hand over fist, but not before I made some niggers stop throwing stones up at the tree. Well, I shinned up aloft and began flinging down the mangoes, and the wretched niggers holloed out, 'Good massa! Massa brave! Massa no frightened ob nobody!' Then suddenly there was a mighty loud barking and up comed a yellow dog, so big as a calf, and the

nigs went off for dear life. 'Him coming, massa! Him running like de debbil, sar!' they shouted out as they went; and then a big chap arrived at the bottom of the tree and began giving me all the law and the prophets, I do assure 'e. For it happened to be his tree.

" 'You tief, come down! come down and my dog he tear you. I catch you at last! It all ober wid you now!'

" 'Not much,' I said. 'I ban't coming down to be tored by thicky hulking dog, John.' (Us calls all niggers 'John.')

" 'You a tief and you take to gaol, sar. I no go till you come down,' he says.

" And I knowed as my ship would sail in two hours or less!

" 'Now list to me, you black ass,' I says. 'I thought this here was a wild tree—as anybody would. You ought to stick your name on the tree. And I ban't a thief, and if you call me one, I'll break your fat head. Just take the dog and tie him up, then I'll come down and us'll have a bit of a tell about it.'

" 'You tief my mangoes! You lodge in de gaol!' was all he could think of. So I told him not to be such a tarnation fool.

" 'There's your mangoes on the ground,' I said. 'I'll give you a bob for 'em, and if I

hear any more about it, I'll apply to the Governor to have your beast of a dog shot.'

"'Twas the money done it!

"'A bob—a bob, massa!' he says. 'Dat's diff'rent, sar! I'se too sorry I spoke so rude to massa. A bob! Go home, you damn dog!'

"So the dog cleared out and I comed down and gived the heathen his shilling, and took the mangoes and marched off to the Careenage and joined my ship. But I'd paid a lot too much money, of course.

"Next morn us got to St Vincent—an island that runs up into the sky, like a Dartmoor tor, only 'tis a lot larger and the sides of un be all covered with palms and savage trees. The town lies spread at sea level—all white and red—and the forest slopes behind with fine trees. Some of them was blazing with red flowers. A pride of the morning shower falled just as we got here, and the rain flashed like fire. There was a rainbow in it, and I never seed such a bright one afore. The caps of the mountains was hidden in clouds, but the sun touched 'em and made 'em all rosy; then it swallowed 'em up and drawed 'em into the blazing blue. There's Carib Indians to St Vincent, and one Carib be worth five niggers when it comes to a bit of work. They've got a queer sort of religion, I'm told, though not so queer as the

negroes. The niggers' religion be called Obeah, and the Obi Men be awful rum customers. Missionaries try to stop 'em and their goings-on, but Obi mysteries still happen and all sorts of devilish deeds are done in secret.

"I never knowed a place what smelled worse than Kingstown, St Vincent. Farmer Chown's muck-heap's a fool to it. Niggers be the same here as everywhere—a poor, slack-witted lot. If you want to see work, you've got to go and look at the coolies in the sugar factories, or the Caribs. Among niggers only one in a hundred works. T'other ninety-nine look on and talk and give advice. But they be men and women all right, though our bosun, Jim Bradley, says 'tis generally thought they haven't got no souls. St Vincent be the place where arrowroot comes from. After that we went down to next island, by name of Grenada, and seed a long row of rocks sticking out of the sea, which be called the Grenadines. They are scorched up places—just splashes of yellow rock against the blue sea; but folks dwell in some of 'em and on some live nought but the wild goats and pelicans. The fishes in these seas fight like hell, and be always a-lashing the surface with their fins and tails, seemingly. Can't live and let live by the looks of it. A

flying-fish do put me in mind of myself, for he's always moving on. If he bides in the sea, barracudas and other chaps go for him, and when he comes out for a sail in the air, the birds are after him. Then the swordfish go for the porpoises, and the sharks go for everything.

"Grenada be a bigger place than St Vincent, and very wild up on the mountains by the look of it. All along the sea runs a strip of silvery sand, and cocoanut palms almost dip in the water. Our tub called here and there, and I seed wonderful fine goyles and coombs running inland, all full of blue air and forests and waterfalls a-tumbling down off great crags in the mountains. 'Tis an awful savage island as was throwed up by volcanoes out of the sea once 'pon a time, and will be throwed down again in like manner sooner or late—so Jim Bradley says.

"Grenada be a wonnerful brave place for nutmegs, which you might not know grow 'pon trees like almond trees. There be male and female trees, and one male goes to every ten females. A fine thing, even if you was a tree, to have ten wives—so Bradley says! But I only want one, and that's my dinky Minnie, so brave and so lovely.

"St George, Grenada, we stopped at for a

week, and I seed a great deal of the place. They've got a lunatic asylum and a klink there; and they want 'em both. Niggers often go mad, but it ban't from over-work, that I will swear.

"The King of the Caribs lived here, but he was a poor fool and believed the French. They gived him a few bottles of brandy and he gived them his island on conditions. But of course they broke the conditions. And pretty well all the Caribs died fighting. The last of the King's men jumped into the sea and was drowned rather than give in.

"The market would make you die of laughing, I'm sure. Never seed such a chatter of business even to Moreton on a Saturday. Such a row! You'd think the wealth of the nation was changing hands, but you could buy up the whole lot pretty near for thirty shilling. But a gay bit of coloured scenery, I promise you, with the women's turbans all a-bobbing, like a million coloured parrots. 'Tis a very fine place for cocoanut palms also. The little young nuts look like giant acorns in long sprigs. I went to a nigger man on business and met with some mighty strange sights in his garden. There was land-crabs lived there and a tame tortoise, and a nursery of young cocoanut trees and a nursery of young niggers also, for the

man was a family man and had a lot of little people.

“ ‘Dat my youngest darter,’ he said to me, and pointed to a little maid playing along with the lizards and things and dressed the same as them.

“ ‘A very nice darter, too,’ I said to him.

“ ‘Dat my son ober dar,’ he said, ‘and dat my next youngest son, and dem gals eating dat shaddock—dey twins.’

“I told him I never seed a braver lot o’ childer, and then he went in his house and fetched out his wife and his old father and his aunt. And I praised the lot and told him what a terrible lucky chap he was; and he got so pleased that he gived me half a barrow-load of fruit.

“There’s a lake inland by the name of Etang, and the niggers say how the Mother of the Rain lives in. But I told ’em that the Mother o’ Rain lives homealong with us in Cranmere Pool ’pon Dartymoor. But they wouldn’t believe that. Anyway, their Mother of Rain belongs to Obeah, and she’m an awful strong party. ’Tis a wisht, silent place she do live in, all hid in palms and ferns and wonderful trees blazing with flowers. They do say the witch comes out of the water of a moony night to sing; but I don’t know nought about that.

I'd go and have a look and see if I could teel a trap here and there; but there ban't no game worth naming in these parts, though Bradley tells me they've got deer in Tobago. If there be, I'll bring some pairs of their horns home to 'e to stick over the doors to Hangman's Hut. How I do wish I was there; but ban't no good coming back yet awhile, and when I do, us will have to be awful spry. I wonder if you've found out aught—you or Titus? I daresay such a clever man as him have got wind of the truth afore now. I be bringing home some pink coral studs for him. You might let him know it, if you please. I suppose they've gived back my gun to you? They did ought to, since no doubt everybody thinks I be dead. If you be very pressed for money, sell the gun to Sim; but not if you can help it."

"Mister Henry Vivian be in Tobago, and I hope as he'll suffer me to have speech with him some day soon. 'Twould be a tower of strength to get him 'pon our side. But such a stickler as him and so quick to take a side and hold to it—he may be against me, and, if so, the less I see of him the better.

"But I must tell about Trinidad while my paper holds out. We comed to it after Grenada, and a very fine place it is. And a very terrible

sight I seed in the Court House there, namely, no less than a nigger tried for murder. The coolies be short-tempered people and often kill their wives. Then the vultures find 'em in the sugar-canes. But niggers, though they talk a lot, never kill one another as a rule. This chap had shot a tax-collector, and the black people in the court didn't seem to take it very serious ; but the jury fetched it in murder, and he was sentenced to be hanged, I'm sorry to say. My flesh did cream upon my bones to hear it, for it might have been me ; and them words I should certainly have heard but for my own way of doing things after they took me. The nigger stood so steady as if he was cut out of coal. A good plucked man, and went to his doom like a hero. It took three judges to hang him. They sat under a great fan in court to keep 'em cool. But all three growed awful hot over the job. The people thought 'twas very hard on the man, and so did I.

“ They've got a pitch lake here, and there's a lot of business doing, and a racecourse and a railway.

“ At Port o' Spain I met the rummest human that ever I did meet. 'Twas in a drinking-place what me and Bradley went to one evening. This here chap was bar-keeper, and his father had been a Norwegian, and his mother

had been a Spaniard from Hayti, and he was born in the Argentine Republic, and he said he was an Englishman! Swore it afore all-comers! Us told the man it couldn't be so—according to the laws of nature; and he got his wool off something cruel, and cussed in five languages, and axed us who the blue, blazing hell we thought we were, to come teaching him. He said he was English to the marrow in his bones; and we proved he couldn't be, in good sailor language. Then he said that such trash as us wasn't going to be heard afore him; and then we got a bit short like (though not in liquor, that I promise you) and told the man he was no better than a something or other mongrel—like everybody else in foreign parts. After that glasses got flying about, and we slung our hook back to the ship. But it shows what fools men are, I reckon.

“The coolies put all their money on their wives. And I'd do the same, as well you know. But they don't do it in a manner of speaking, but really and truly, for they hammer all their silver money into nose-rings, and bracelets, and armlets, and leglets, and their females go chinking about with the family fortune hanging to 'em, like fruit to a tree. I seed a lot at a sugar factory nigh Saint Joseph—a little place out over from Port o' Spain. One estate there

done very well, but others was all falling to pieces, and the machinery all rusting, and no business doing at all. The air in a busy factory smells of sugar, and the canes be smashed between steel rollers, and the juice comes out in a stream, like a moor brook. Then they set to work and, after a lot of things have been done to this here juice, including boiling, it turns into brown sugar. And the remains be treacle, and the crushed cane is used for firing. They also make rum out of sugar-cane, and very cheerful drinking 'tis. The coolie girls be awful purty—so brown as my Minnie, with dark eyes that flash. But they keep themselves to themselves. They wouldn't keep company or go out walking with a sailor man for the world. And their men folks be very short and sharp with them. One gal was singing and scrubbing a floor when I catched sight of her. All in red she was, with silver bangles on her arms, and wonnerful glimmering eyes, and not a day more than thirteen years old. 'That's a purty child,' I said to Jim Bradley. 'Child be damned,' he said in his short way. 'She's a growed woman and very like got a family.' The truth is that they be grandmothers at thirty. But I've only seen one purtier girl in all my born days, and that's my gal.

"All the machinery in Trinidad be worked

with cocoanut oil. 'Tis a very funny smell, but you soon get used to it.

"Our next port was Tobago, and here we shall bide for a good while and let our fires out and have a go at the boilers. This letter will go off from there to you, and I do hope and trust as it will find you as it leaves me at present, my dear wife. Ban't much good for me to ax you to write the news, because you wouldn't know where to send it. But I hope afore next year be out that we'll come together again, and your poor chap will be proved an innocent man.

"I'll send you three pound from here presently, and another letter along with it. If there's any good news and the charges don't run too high, you might send a telegram on getting this letter, to 'Bob Bates, Steamship *Peabody*, Bridgetown, Barbados.' We go back there in three weeks, and shall be there afore you get this. I be 'Bob Bates' now, and shall remain so for the present till I can be Dan Sweetland again without running my neck in the rope.

"Lord save us, but how I do long to be squeezing my own true wife! Awful rough luck we've had, but there's a better time coming. Tell mother and father all about me, but make 'em swear on father's old Bible fust that they'll name it to none else. They can hear

bits of this letter, but not all. I'm sending you twenty thousand kisses. I wish to God I was bringing 'em. Last thing I done at Trinidad was to cut your name and mine on a great aloe leaf in the Botanical Garden when nobody was looking. And over 'em I scratched two hearts with a arrow skewered through. They aloe leaves live for ever, I'm told ; so our names will be there for people to see long after we be dead and gone, I hope. But that won't be for a mighty long time yet, please God.

"I may say that I've growed a bit religious since we parted. Ban't nothing to name and won't make any difference in my feelings to old friends, but you can't see the Lord's wonders in the Deep without growing a bit thoughtful like. And if by good chance I ever get back to you and stand afore the world clear of the killing of poor Adam Thorpe, then I shall be a church-member for ever more—or else a chapel member—which you like best. But one for sartain. So no more at present, from your faithful husband till death,
DANIEL SWEETLAND."

CHAPTER XI

THE LAST OF THE "PEABODY"

FATE, it seemed, had ordered a final fleeting happiness for the lonely young wife before her sun was to set in sorrow. For a season the glow of Daniel's letter clung to her, warmed her heart, and lighted her spirit. Nor did she hide the news from all. Daniel's parents heard much of the letter, as he directed, and Minnie trusted Mr Beer and his wife with the news also. But nobody else heard it. Then, as summer approached and she already began to count the days until another letter might reach her, a crashing grief fell upon the woman, and all her future was changed. Hope perished; life henceforth stretched forward into the dreary future without one ray of light to break its darkness.

For a moment in her shattering sorrow even the truth itself seemed no longer worth discovery. Nothing mattered any more, for the end had come. Even while she was reading his letter, so full of life and hope, the hand that wrote it was clay again; and, under circum-

stances the most awful, his little vessel and all thereon had perished.

When Titus Sim kept his appointment and brought himself to Hangman's Hut that Minnie might sew a yellow button upon his gaiter, she had some ado to hide her splendid thoughts while she worked for him. From the first she had studiously concealed the truth from Titus, nor did she speak a word of it now. His presence always made her heart cold and hard; for as she thought of the past, his action grew more and more clear to her. He had laid a deadly trap for Daniel, and Daniel, trusting him better than anybody in the world, had fallen headlong into it. Whether Sim was actually present at the death of Thorpe Minnie still knew not; but that he was familiar with the circumstances, and that he had on the night of the murder fetched Daniel's gun and placed it ready to be found on the following morning, she felt assured. His purpose was to gain herself. But what to do at this juncture she did not know. She dared not summon Daniel home as yet, and she dared not impart her discoveries to any other. Then happened circumstances that made all vain and turned revenge into a thing too mean and shallow to pursue. After the announcement of her husband's death the perspective and significance

of life were altered. For long days she moved listlessly from her bed back to her bed again. Sleep only had power to comfort her, while yet the overwhelming tragic truth tortured each waking hour. Sleep nightly she welcomed as she would have welcomed death.

In this strange fashion came the fatal news to her.

Sim was accustomed to bring books and newspapers upon the occasion of his visits, and in a daily journal, at the time of that awful event, telegrams appeared of the volcanic catastrophe that had burst upon the West Indies, had shaken St Vincent to its heights, and overwhelmed much of the unfortunate island of Martinique. Chance ordered the intelligence upon the day that Sim had fixed for his formal proposal, and her eyes were actually fixed upon the *Western Morning News*, where it lay spread over her table, at the moment that the man was asking her to marry him.

"I can't hold it in no more," he said. "You know right well what I mean. I've been patient too—the Lord knows how patient. Oh, woman, don't torment me any longer. For God's sake say you'll marry me. My life's one cruel stretch on the rack as it is. All I've done to get you you'll never know. You've been the one thought and hope and prayer and longing

of my life ever since I first set eyes on you, and now—now there's nought between us—now—Minnie! Good God—what's the matter—what have I done?"

He broke off and leapt to his feet, for she had fallen back in her chair and an expression of great terror and horror had come into her face. She had only heard his last words. The woman did not faint; but for the moment she was powerless to speak. Her emotion had robbed her cheek of blood and made her dizzy. In response to his cry she pointed to the sheet before her. He glanced at the long Reuter telegram, and then noted the brief paragraph upon which she kept her finger:—

"Among the ill-fated vessels that perished with all hands was the English steamer *Peabody* (Nailer and Co.). It is reported that she attempted to steam out of harbour, but was overwhelmed and sunk in the awful convulsion from above and below. Every soul on board perished."

"What is this to you or to me? What do you know? Tell me if I can do anything," cried Titus Sim.

"'Every soul—every soul,' she said, quoting in a strange voice under her breath. "'Every soul,' but it means 'everybody.' The souls have gone back where there's no hopes nor fears nor sorrows. But his body—his dear

body—all—all—perished. I can't read no more. Does it say all?"

"That awful thing in Martinique. Yes, they be full of it at the house, and full of thanksgivings that it wasn't Tobago that was smitten. But you, Minnie—what is this to you?"

"Death," she said. "His death; and his death be mine—the death of all that's best in me—the death of all I kept alive for him."

"For—for—you don't mean your husband? Not Daniel Sweetland?"

"He was on board her. 'Twas to her he went and in her he sailed. I only heard it a thought more than a month ago. Heard it under his own hand. He wrote me a letter. And now—"

"There might be another ship of that name. But how much this means! And you could hide it all from me! And I thought—"

"You thought he was in Wall Shaft Gully. And now he lies in a bigger grave than that—my Dan—driven away to die. May God remember the man who ruined my husband!"

For once Sim was shaken from his power of ready speech; for once his tongue seemed tied. The tremendous nature of this event made him powerless. Yet at the bottom of his bewildered mind lurked joy. The thing he had toiled to bring about appeared at last accomplished

without further possibility of failure. Doubt no longer existed. Sweetland was now dead indeed. He concealed his thanksgiving and began to mourn. No more of love he spake, but strove to find consolation for her in religious reflections. Dry-eyed she stared from him to the newspaper, from the newspaper back to him. Then she bade him leave her, and he went, but stopped at the publichouse hard by and told his tremendous news to Mr and Mrs Beer. They, who knew the secret of Daniel's disappearance, were stricken with profound sorrow, and scarcely had Sim proclaimed the truth before Jane Beer hurried bare-headed from the house and ran to her friend.

"Poor young woman!" groaned Johnny in genuine grief, "what a world of up and downs and hopes and fears she have suffered, to be sure! To think as one pair of girl's shoulders be called upon to carry such a burden. There's nought to be done. Only time can help her; an' maybe you."

"To think," said Sim, "and I was that moment putting marriage before her! Another moment and she must have told me she was a wife; and then it caught her eye—staring from the printed page—that she was a widow!"

"She told us the secret and I made a joyous rhyme about it; but what's rhymes to her now?"

Yet I'll do one, and this day I'll do it, for many's the poor broken heart as have sucked comfort from a well-turned verse—else why do we have hymns? Well, it will come back to you, Titus. For my part I could wish as Daniel had died to home where first we thought he did. A sea death be so open an' gashly. For my part I'd sooner have gone down Vitifer mine shaft and know my bones would bide in the land that bred 'em."

"Well, the mystery be all out now. No doubt he visited her that night he gave the policemen the slip. 'Twas hard I should never know the secret, for I'm sure Dan would have told me afore all the world."

"She's only got his memory now, poor lamb; an' that won't keep her warm of a winter night. 'Twas ordained you should have her, no doubt. But you musn't ax her till the tears be dried. She'll weep a lot. Turn and twist as you may, death will grab you some day. The appointed time comes round as sure as the sun rises. Pig or man, each has his span. There's verses rising up in me, Titus, so I won't keep you. What was the name of the poor hero's ship? D'you call it to mind?"

"The *Peabody*," answered Sim; then he departed with strange thoughts for company.

In truth Titus had much ado to marshal his

ideas. He stood exactly where he believed that he had stood from the time of Daniel's disappearance ; but the fact that Sweetland was only now removed from his path by death startled him not a little. He hardly realised his fortune. In his mind was a dark cloud, for that Minnie should so carefully have kept her secret from him meant mischief. She had not trusted him with the truth. There was a reason for that, and the reason promised to be the reverse of pleasant. Sim had been deceived by Minnie's attitude. Without attempt to blind his eyes, her demeanour had led him to suppose that she at least was content in his society, that she trusted him, that she bore to him the regard due to her husband's first and favourite companion. But she had deliberately chosen to keep him in ignorance, not only of Daniel's safety, but also concerning his actual existence ; and this reserve caused Sim a great deal of painful surprise. Surely it indicated that Daniel's widow did not trust him ; and for that distrust a reason must exist.

Titus perceived that much depended upon his future attitude. To win her absolute confidence would now be necessary before any further talk of love. He ransacked his sleepless mind that night, and ere morning saw the way clear. His good faith

must be made apparent; it must shine above any shadow of suspicion. Minnie should learn that her husband's honour and fair name were as much to Titus Sim as to herself. How to effect this result was his problem, and the footman believed that he could solve it. For Sim was perfectly familiar with the truth concerning Adam Thorpe's end; and no man knew better than did he that Daniel had no part in the crime. The secret murderer was not hidden from Titus, nor was the hand that placed Sweetland's gun where he had found it.

Everything conspired to his purpose. He calculated that in a month's time he would be able to clear Sweetland's name before the world. Then his own reward seemed clear. Minnie, once convinced that her vague fears and suspicions did him wrong, could hardly deny him what he begged. Into his fixed and immovable resolution to make her his own he poured all the strength of a tremendous will. He had not come so far upon the journey to be repulsed. He had not moved by dark ways and committed worse than crimes for nothing. From a mental condition of anger and uneasiness, his devious soul plotted itself back into content and calm. The end was assured and the means to play his final strokes now lay clear before the man's intelligence. To establish absolute confidence in

himself as Sweetland's friend — true even beyond death—was now his purpose; and the thing he planned to do, if brought to a successful issue, could hardly fail to show him in a noble light and convince the sceptic, if any such existed beside Minnie, that his aims were pure and his faith above all suspicion.

A week later, when she had told her secret, and her little world mourned in its wonder, and yet also triumphed at the ingenuity of the native who would never return again, Titus Sim visited Minnie with offers to assist her in any step she might now be contemplating. But she did not avail herself of the suggestion.

"I'm going back to my aunt come presently," she said. "I can't bide here no more now. After Michaelmas I give it up an' return to Moreton."

Her face was very pale against her black dress, and darkness and sorrow haunted her beautiful eyes; but no living soul had seen her deepest grief. That was hidden from all. Her voice never shook when she spoke of Daniel to Titus Sim, for instinct told her the man, despite his protestations, did not share her bereavement. Only with Daniel's mother, or in the company of Jane Beer, did she reveal a glimpse of her breaking heart.

"Command me, if I can serve you in any

possible manner," he said. "And don't think I'm forgetting this great sorrow because 'tis not always upon my tongue. Far from it; Daniel is never out of my thoughts. He's beyond the reach of aught but prayers; but his honour and good name are the legacies he left behind, and 'tis for us to treasure them and make 'em shine out like the sun from behind this cloud that darkens them. I know only too well you don't believe me. It's been the greatest grief in a sad life—the greatest but Daniel's death—that you kept his secret from me and did not let me know that he was still alive. I've had nought but sleepless nights thinking of it. And why for you don't trust me I can't guess, and why you hid the welfare of my greatest friend from me I shall never know; but this I know: you had no just reason and not by word or deed, or thought or dream have I ever done him wrong. Be that as it may. I'll say nothing about it and I'll ask you for no explanation, for 't isn't a time to wrangle which of us—man or woman—friend or wife—loved him best. I'll not prate; I'll do. I believe even now that 'twill be my blessed lot to clear his memory afore the world. You gaze at me as if you thought that 'twould be no joy to me to do it—see how I read what's in your eyes! But I swear afore the Throne of

Heaven that I'd sooner clear his name and sweeten his memory than be a prince in the land, or the ruler of cities."

"If you could do it, why have you waited until now?" she asked coldly.

"Because Providence willed that I should wait. And even now I'm only hopeful, not positive. I should have striven to do all and bring you the glad news when I'd got it proved beyond the doubt of the world; but now Heaven has hit upon a better way. Yes, 'Heaven's' the word, for in righting Daniel in the world's eyes, I pray God will right me in yours, Minnie Sweetland."

He paused, but she only surveyed him silently, and he spoke again.

"Thus it stands. The poor soul commonly called 'Drunkard' Parkinson, is now at his last gasp, or near it. He cannot live more than a month; doctor has told him so. But, as I have always feared, that man has evil secrets. What they are I only guess, but my guess during the last few days has developed into certainty. You know young Prowse lives in the cottage that adjoins Rix Parkinson's? Two days ago he came to tell me that poor Rix wanted to see me, and to know how soon I could call upon him. I went at once, and then he confessed that there is much upon his conscience. I

begged him to see Parson West, whose deep wisdom and sympathy and knowledge of Heaven are denied to no sinner; but he refused. 'Not him, nor any other man,' he said. 'Tis a woman I want to see—the wife of that chap, Dan Sweetland, as runned away after that they'd taken him for murder.' He did not know that Dan was dead, and I did not tell him, for the fact might have changed his determination. I promised to bring you to him, and I prevailed with him that he would let me be present also. He is desirous to tell you something, and since the confession must have a witness to make it of any worth, I, too, shall hear it, that it may be supported in the world after Parkinson dies. For he is on the way to die, and he specially told me that the thing he meant to tell you must not be made public until his death. What it is I can guess, as I have said; and doubtless you can, too."

"He killed Adam Thorpe."

"I believe so with all my soul. They were old enemies, and three years ago Parkinson went to gaol for three months after assaulting Thorpe. Either he did it, or he knows right well who did. And he knows that the man who did it was not our poor Daniel."

"I will come when he pleases," said Minnie.

"I hope your opinion may be the right one, Mr Sim."

"And I hope that you will think kinder of me when, through my ceaseless toil and labour, I have cleared my friend's memory."

He left her then without waiting for an answer, and a week later a day was fixed.

It happened that Minnie was in Moreton-hampstead upon the occasion of making this final appointment to visit the sick man, and as she returned to the Moor, she met young Samuel Prowse—well known to her as an old friend of Daniel. She passed him with a nod of recognition; then she changed her mind; a thought suddenly struck her, and she called the youth to her side.

CHAPTER XII.

HENRY VIVIAN TRIES TO DO HIS DUTY

IT is now necessary to be occupied directly with Daniel, and those brief days before the *Peabody* met her fate.

From Tobago she returned to Barbados with a small cargo of turtle and cocoanuts; then she sailed directly to the Northern Lesser Antilles, and reached her next and last port, St Pierre, in Martinique.

But we are concerned with earlier events affecting young Sweetland, and these may best be chronicled by setting down the opening passages of a second letter that he began to write to his wife at Scarborough, the little port of Tobago. This communication was never completed, but it covers a period of fifteen days in the life of the writer, and when he put it aside to finish on another occasion he little dreamed that he would see the sheet no more.

“MY OWN DEAR HEART” wrote he—“Here’s the old tub at Tobago with steam in her rotten boilers again! Talk about volcanoes and such-like! ’Tis us aboard the *Peabody* that be on a volcano, not the shore folks. This here’s

a very fine island, and I've had a merry time when I could get ashore. They laugh at me, because I be gathering together such a lot of queer things for you. God He knows if you'll ever get 'em and hang 'em round the walls to home, but if you do, I lay you'll be mazed with wonder. There's a huge river by name of Orinoco that pours out of the mainland of South America, and it brings to these shores all manner of queer seeds and shells and such-like, including coral and coralline, like stone fans, all very beautiful for ornaments. I tramp along when off duty and fill my pockets, and say every minute, 'My stars, won't Minnie like that!' or 'These here will make a necklace almost so pretty as pearls, for her neck!' There be little silver-like shells here, all curly. I've got scores; and the niggers say as there be real pink pearls to be got; but I doubt it, 'cause if there was, why don't somebody with plenty of time get 'em? Sometimes the cocoanuts will fall with a bang just while you be under the palms. I near had my head knocked off by a whacker t'other day; then I forced a hole in his monkey face (for they be all like monkeys one end) and drank the milk and shared the creamy inside with a hungry dog as chanced to be passing that way. As for adventures, I had one with a hoss would make

'em laugh to home. I calls it a hoss, but never you seed such a lop-sided bag o' bones. But 'twas something to have un between my legs, and I made un gallop a bit, much to his surprise, afore I'd done with un. A nigger boy went with me to get any queer things as might happen by the way, and I rode into the island to see a river where they say there be alligators. The hoss was called 'Nap,' and the nigger went by the name of Peter. And a very fine time us had of it at first. The road led up and up through palms and tamarinds and mangoes, and a million trees I'd never seed or heard of. Frangipani made the air sweet to the nose. It grows in stars 'pon great naked boughs, and they make scent of it. Then there was bind-weeds, like we get to home but larger, all crawled all over the hedges, with yellow and purple flowers to 'em. And everywhere in the blazing woods was flowers and seeds, and berries and cocoa trees, which be just like them advertisements in the shop windows to Moreton of Cadbury's Cocoa! The pods hang on the trees all purple and gold. I got seeds and berries for you, and having a little shot-gun as Bradley lent me, I killed a few birds and one sun-bird as be like a splash of fire on the wing, and a green humming-bird or two. My hoss he loafed along, thinking of anything

but his business, but he was eating out of the hedge all the while, and sometimes 'twas a fight between us which should get to something first. As to alligators, I never seed the tail of one; but lizards was there by the million, and iguanas too. They be very big chaps and pretty eating when you can catch 'em, so Bradley says. The lizards be all colours of the rainbow and all sizes, from a tadpole to a squirrel. In the trees was all manner of hot-house things a-blazing away and quite at home, and on the hill-sides grew wild plantain, wild indigo, guinea-grass, cotton, cashew trees (cashews be nuts), cabbage palms, and all manner of other fine things, with the humming-birds and butterflies looking like flowers blowed out of the trees. Then, as for the stream, it bustled along for all the world like a Dartmoor brook, and the sound of it among the stones was like a word from home. But instead of the heather and whortleberries and fern, there was all foreigners 'pon the bank, and instead of a Moorman coming along with a nitch of reeds or a cart of peat I found a lot of black gals washing linen in the stream.

“‘Well, my dears, have 'e seed any alligators up-along?’ I axed 'em; and they said, ‘No, massa sailor, we no see no alligators.’

“I had a row with the hoss coming back and

was much surprised to find he'd got devil enough in him to run away. Of course I held on, and 'twas rather amusing except for all the things he jerked out of my pockets. 'Peared to me that he galloped on one side and trotted on t'other. When he runned away he was going about three miles an hour. Afore that I never seed the funeral as wouldn't have caught him up and passed him. He got me down to the wharf; then his gear all carried away and I falled off with the saddle on top of me.

"'Tis pretty eating here, and we have tree oysters, if you'll believe it, that grow on the roots of trees in the salt creeks. Also snapper-fish, yams, gourd soup, muscovy ducks, cocoanut pudding, guava cheese, and many other tidy things.

"Yesterday I seed Mister Henry 'pon the wharf, with his overseer from the Pelican Sugar Estate—a chap by the name of Jabez Ford. It made me feel terrible queer to see Mister Henry. We was getting a boatload of cocoanuts at the time, so I didn't make myself knowed to him. But when the chance comes I will.

"That man Ford lost his wife rather sudden two or three nights agone. She was half a black woman and believed in a lot of queer,

horrible things like the full-blooded niggers do. And come nightfall, after she died, a awful wailing and howling broke out ashore, for scores of negresses was singing all round Ford's house to keep the Jumbies away. Jumbies belong to the religion of Obi, and they'm awful, flesh-sucking vampires as scent out a corpse like vultures and come through the air and out of the earth to be at it. But if the beast hears women singing, it chokes him off. Certainly the black females sing very nice; and they sang hymns the parson out here has taught them—hymns that comed from England. I almost cried to hear 'em, Minnie, till I remembered as they were being sung to keep off Jumbies; then I laughed. There's another awful terrible customer called a loopgaroo.¹ He's worse than Jumby almost, and he takes off his skin when he's at his nightly devilries, and hides it onder a silk cotton tree. This be all part of Obeah, and I hear tell there's an awful wicked and awful powerful Obi Man, called Jesse Hagan, in Tobago, who's gotten tame Jumbies to work for him. The niggers shiver when they tell about him.

“As to cocoanuts, which you've only seed at a revel ‘three shies a penny,’ out here they be

¹ Loopgaroo—Loupgarou.

a regular trade, though not like what they was. A grower told me that in the old days he'd get a clear profit of £2 on every thousand nuts he sold; now he don't get £1. We be bringing home hundreds of sacks of 'em, but the seller don't count to do much good. Another queer freight we be taking back to Barbados is turtles. These creatures be very common round Tobago. They come up out of the sea of a moonlight night and paddle about in the sand, and lay their eggs. Then niggers, as be lying in wait for 'em, rush out and catch 'em, and throw 'em over 'pon their backs. There they lie till the morn do come, and then they'm brought off to the wharf for shipment. First the owner's mark be branded on the poor devils with a red-hot iron on their yellow bellies; but they be all shell outside, and it don't hurt 'em more than putting a hot shoe on a horse's hoof. Then the turtles is tied by their flippers—two and three at a time—and hoisted aboard. On deck we've got turtle tanks^f waiting for 'em. These be full of salt water, and the turtle lives there as best he can; or if he can't, he dies. No beasts on God's earth have a worse time than turtles when they'm caught. They don't get bit or sup no more, for there's nought we can give 'em that they'll eat. Many die on the way

home, if the weather turns very cold; and aboard a ship you can tell how the turtle be faring by the amount of turtle soup as comes to dinner. And if they do get home, 'tis to have their throats cut pretty quick. But they pay well if they get home alive.

"Now I'll knock off, because I be going ashore to see Mister Henry. We sail to-morrow, so I can't leave it no longer. I'll finish this when I've had speech with him, and much I do hope as I'll find he'll come over to my side."

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Here the unfinished letter broke off, and the things that happened after may be immediately related.

Daniel went ashore with a special message from his captain for the harbour master; but the order was not delivered, because good fortune, as it seemed, had brought Henry Vivian to the pier-head, and, as Daniel climbed up the steps, he almost touched his boyhood's friend. The overseer of the Pelican Estate stood beside him. Mr Jabez Ford had a private venture of turtles about to be shipped in the *Peabody* for Barbados, and now he watched his own mark being set upon the unhappy reptiles. Vivian was also an interested spectator. He turned with an expression of

sorrow from the turtles and found Daniel Sweetland's eyes fixed upon them.

"Mister Henry, 'tis I, Sweetland, from home! I be here this minute to speak to you. And I pray you, for old time's sake, to listen."

Young Vivian started back, and the blood leapt to his cheek.

"Alive!" he said.

"And kicking, your honour. I had to do all I done an' give they policemen the slip, for the law was too strong for me. But afore God I swear I'm an innocent man, and, after my wife, I'd sooner you believed in me than any living."

"Oaths are nothing to you," said the other, coldly. "Come aside and speak to me."

They walked apart on the wharf, and Vivian continued,—

"Why did you lie to the officers and deceive them, and escape, and subsequently delude the world into supposing that you had destroyed yourself? Tell me that. Were those the actions of an innocent man, Daniel Sweetland? I do not think so. If you can prove to me that you did not murder Adam Thorpe, do it; if not, my duty, painful as it may be, is clear. You have escaped justice thus far; but you shall not escape it altogether, if I can prevent you."

Dan stared aghast at such a turn of affairs. The speaker was inflexible. No gentleness marked his voice. He had not noticed the hand that Daniel ventured timidly to put forward.

"I thought 'twas Providence that threw me here," said the sailor. "I counted to find you, sir, as was my friend always, ready to stand up for me against——But what can I say? How can I prove aught, having no witnesses? My gun was found—the beautiful gun you gived me. And if I swear afore my Maker I know no more than you do how it comed in Middlecott woods upon that night, what's the use? I see in your face you be against me and won't believe me."

"I am not a fool, whatever else I may be," answered the other. "To say you do not know how that gun came into Middlecott Lower Hundred is folly. You alone had access to the gun. You *must* know. Whether you killed Thorpe or not, I cannot say; that you saw him die, I believe; and if you could have thrown the blame elsewhere, you would naturally have done so. I am sorry you dared to come to me—sorry for your sake and my own. I have enough anxiety and difficulty on my hands at present without you."

"Very well," said Sweetland, "if that's your

answer, then we be man to man and no love lost. I'll go my way and you can go yours, an' I hope afore your beard's growed you'll get a larger heart in you. If it had been t'other way round, I'd have believed your word like the Bible, an' I'd have fought for you an' spared no sweat to show the world you was an honest, true man. But since you won't believe further than you can see, and haven't got no friendship stronger than what goes down afore this trial, then go your way, an' be damned to you; an' may you never find yourself at a loose end with nought but sudden death waiting for you an' no friend's hand ready to help!"

"Friendships may be broken, and I will never willingly assist a criminal against the laws he has defied and the State he has outraged. You fled to escape the just penalty of your deeds, and no honourable man would succour you. It is not I that am faithless, but yourself. I have never changed; my devotion to duty and to honour has never been hidden from you, and if you had ordered your life on my example, you would not stand where you do to-day."

"I hope you'll see clearer in the time to come, then," answered Daniel. "I be sorry to have troubled you with my poor affairs. I'll ax no more from 'e except to keep your mouth

shut about me. 'That, at least, ban't too much to ax ?'

"Your moral sense is not merely weak, but wanting," answered the other. "To ignore you is to ignore your crime. No Englishman can do that. I, at least, will not have it on my conscience that I let a murderer go free. Move at your peril !"

The sailor glared in sheer wonder ; then his surprise gave place to passion.

"By God, but you'm a canting prig ! Your friendship—'tis trash I wouldn't own for money. Talk of vartue and duty to me ! Do 'e think of all I've suffered—all the torment and misery I've gone through—a man as innocent as the young dawn ! Taken from my wife—called a murderer afore I was tried—every man's hand against me ! The likes of you would make Job break loose. Your honour and your duty ! Bah—stinking stuff. I'd rather be a mongrel nigger without a shirt than you ! I'd—"

Vivian interrupted him and cried out in a loud voice,—

"Arrest this man ! In the name of the law, take him ! He is a murderer !"

They stood some distance from the rest, and now Jabez Ford hastened forward with several negroes. The coloured men chattered wildly, but none made any effort to run in on Sweet-

land. Before they reached him Vivian had already closed with his old friend.

"For justice!" he cried. "Right is on my side, and well you know it!"

"Liar!" answered the other. "You're no man to do this thing. Neither right nor might be on your side. Take what you've courted!"

The unequal struggle was quickly at an end, for Vivian's physical powers were as nothing beside the strength of Daniel. The sailor shook him like a dog shakes a rat; then he gripped his huge arms round him and hugged him breathless.

"So let all be sarved as turns upon their friends in the time of need!" he bellowed. "Come on—come on, the pack of 'e!"

It might have been observed that at this sensational moment the overseer, Jabez Ford, made no instant effort to come to Henry Vivian's rescue. He was as big as Daniel, and apparently as powerful; but while his black eyes blazed and he shouted wildly to the negroes to secure Sweetland, himself he took no risk. He saw the struggling men get nearer and nearer to the edge of the wharf; but he only bawled to the terrified coloured men to separate the fighters.

At last a big buck negroe tried to grasp Daniel from behind, and the sailor, bending his

head, drove with full force at the black's chest, and fairly butted him head foremost into the sea. A moment later Vivian was in the water also, while Ford cried to the negroes to leap in and frighten the sharks. The overseer fumbled with a lifebelt the while ; but long before he had cut it from its fastenings Henry Vivian swam with strong strokes to the landing stage and climbed upon it.

No anger marked his demeanour, despite this sharp reverse. He brushed the water from his face and looked for Sweetland, only to find Daniel had vanished.

"Thank Heaven—thank Heaven!" said Ford, warmly. "My heart was in my mouth. The water under this stage harbours a dozen sharks."

"Where's that man?"

"He's safe enough. He can't escape in the long run. He knocked down two policemen, and then the harbour-master, who tried to stop him. After that he bolted to the left there, and has got into the woods. It may be a long job, but he must be caught sooner or late."

"He's a runaway from justice—a poacher and a murderer. By an amazing chance we have met here. We were boys together. Everything must be done that can be done to arrest him."

"Come to my house and get a change of clothes," answered Jabez Ford. "Thank God, the wretch was not a murderer twice over. You've had a merciful and marvellous escape, Mr Vivian."

"Which might have itself been escaped if you had been quicker and braver," answered the young man, coldly. "I'm afraid you are a coward, Jabez Ford."

"Presence of mind is a precious gift," answered the overseer, with great humility. "I did the best that I could think of. Of course, had I guessed that he was going to throw you into the sea, I should have rushed at him myself, cost what it might."

Mr Ford turned his face away as he spoke.

"Come," he said. "You must change your clothes quickly or you will be chilled."

"After I have been to the Office of Police, not before," answered Henry Vivian.

Meanwhile the runaway made small work of such opposition as was offered to his escape. Two negroes tried to stop him, but only one stood up to him at the critical moment, and was paid for his pluck by a terrific knock-down blow on his flat nose. The harbour-master—a small but brave Scot—next stood in the way of liberty and, despite Dan's shouted warning,

attempted to intercept the runaway. He was in the dust a moment later, and Sweetland, sending a dozen men, women, and children flying like cackling poultry before his rush, got clear of Scarborough and took to the hills. He pushed steadily onwards and upwards to an impenetrable jungle that lay on the steep side of Fort Saint George, and there, where aforetime French and English had fought at death grips, he rested, drew his breath, and considered his position. Far beneath spread the stagnation of the little port, southward gleamed the metal roofing of the Pelican Sugar Estate, and from time to time, faint through the distance, he heard a hooter roaring from the hungry works to the plantations for more cane. Steam puffed from tall pipes; smoke rolled from chimneys; like bright insects the Coolies ran hither and thither in the compounds.

Day died while the fugitive kept his hiding-place. Then a swift, but amazing sunset encompassed him. Rose and gold was the sky, all streaked with tattered ribbons of orange cloud. The light swam reflected upon the sea, and it spread to the lofty horizon in broad sheets of reflected splendour. From the mountains the scene was superb in its manifold glory; then the vision perished and inky silhouettes of palm and plantain and bread-fruit

tree stood out black and solid against the water. Far below the *Peabody* lay, like a toy ship, and twinkled with lights upon the rosy sea. Darkness leapt out of the East and under the fringes of the forest night had already come. Tree-frogs chirruped with endless crisp tinkle of sound ; the air was filled with the drowsy hum of insect life, fire-flies flashed ; and from far below, the mournful boomings of the marsh-frogs made music proper to the time.

Sweetland pursued his slow way until midnight came. He climbed on mechanically hour after hour, until the air on his cheek and the stars above told him that he had reached some mountain-top. Further for the present it was impossible to proceed. Until day, therefore, he postponed thought and action. He tightened his belt to stay hunger ; then rolled up in a dry corner under the savage and spined foliage of an opuntia, and there slept dreamlessly until the return of the sun.

CHAPTER XIII

THE OBI MAN

WHEN Daniel awoke the sun was climbing swiftly to the zenith, and the full blaze of it burnt upon a tropical tangle of palmetto and mango, plantain and palm. He found himself hidden in a brake of luxuriant vegetation almost at the apex of a lofty hill that overlooked the Caribbean Sea. Strange sounds fell upon his ears, and he perceived that his resting-place was beneath a prickly-pear fence, on the other side of which stood a thatched cottage and extended an acre of cleared land. Beneath stretched the dark green and orange-tawny of the forests; strips of thorny cactus hedge ensured privacy for the clearing, and here a tamarind tree reared its delicate foliage, and here the broad leaves of bananas rustled, with foliage all tattered by the breezes. A goat was tethered to a little pomegranate tree in the garden, and over the cleared soil grew vines of the sweet potato.

A second glance at the hut revealed to Daniel its exceptional character and significance. Before he saw the strange and solitary human

being who inhabited it, the sailor guessed that he stood upon the threshold of mystery. As a matter of fact he had intruded into the secret stronghold of Jesse Hagan, the Obi Man. The situation was silent and mysterious ; the place was adorned, or made horrible, with fragments of things dead. Two bullocks' skulls stood at the entrance of Mr Hagan's dwelling, and round his land bobbed a fantastic ribbon whereon hung empty bottles, bright feathers, and fragments of gaudy rag. Within this zone none dared to enter uninvited, for Obeah is still alive—a creed beyond the power of missionary to shatter or destroy. Fools fear Obi, and wise men find him useful ; hence the high priests of that Satanic cult still thrive. A negro would no more speak disrespectfully of them than he would of his own grand-parents.

Suddenly, as Daniel stared and felt a growing inclination to be gone, the mystic himself appeared and stood in the morning light. He appeared profoundly ancient, and his ribs made a gridiron of his lean breast. His limbs were skin and bone ; his scanty wool was grey ; a tangled network of furrows and deep lines scarred and seamed his face in every direction ; and, curiously wide apart, on either side of a huge, flat, Ethiopian nose, the man's eyes gleamed from his withered headpiece, like the

eyes of a toad. Jesse was in extreme undress. Only the ruins of a pair of trousers covered his loins and a band of red cloth circled his throat. Despite his advanced age, no little physical strength remained to him, and now, as Daniel watched, the negro displayed it. Taking an iron spade and seeking a corner of the garden near his unseen visitor, Jesse turned aside the long, creeping fingers of a snake gourd that trailed there under the shade of a citron tree, and began to dig in soft earth. As the old creature worked and sank swiftly downward into the soil, he sang to himself in a piping treble with the usual West Indian whine. The voice was feeble; but the words were sinister and told of evil. A blue bird sat on a thorn and put his head on one side to hear the song; a green lizard, with eyes like Jesse's own, rustled out from the cactus fence and stopped, with palpitating, tremulous motion of its front paws, to listen also. Then the bird flew and the reptile fled, and Daniel Sweetland was sole, secret audience of the song.

“ Low dem lie, low dem lie—

Dey come, dey come, but dey never go by ;

And de roots ob de creeping snake-gard know,

Where dey sleep so still in de hole so low—

Obeah-die !

Obeah-do !

Low dem lie, low dem lie—
Hark de buzz ob de carrion fly !
But nobody guess what the snake-gard know,
Twining him root far down below—
Obeah-die !
Obeah-do !

Low dem lie, low dem lie—
De worms dey crawl in de dead men's eye,
And de snake-gard he suck, and Jesse he know
What lie so still in de hole so low—
Obeah-die !
Obeah-do !”

The song rose and sank and seemed to hang in the trees and creep about like an evil presence. The refrain rose into a wail, and its last penetrating note was answered by crisp stridulation of great winged grasshoppers. Jesse's uncanny melody fitted the place, the man, and the task.

“I never did!” thought Daniel, as his eyes grew round. “If the old devil ban't digging a grave! And singing rhymes to his beastly self over it too! To think that Johnny Beer ban't the only verse-maker as I've met with in my travels! But Johnny never in all his born days let off such a rhyme as that. I'm sure us never would have stood it. A grave, sure enough—an' more'n one poor wretch has been buried there seemingly.”

The remark was called forth by an incident, for Mr Hagan suddenly exhumed a skull. It was low and flat-browed. Jesse set it very gravely upon the edge of the pit and then addressed it.

“Who was you, sar?” he asked. “You no answer me, sar? Den you berry rude, imperent young fellow!”

Whereupon he smacked the empty brain-pan with a spade, so that some of the teeth fell out. The man and the skull grinned at each other, then Jesse grew serious and spoke again.

“You larf—eh? *You* larf! Me Gard, I dunno what you got to larf about! You’s Jephson—dat’s you. I ’member Jephson. Massa Ford, he want Jephson ‘rub out,’ and send him wid a message to ole Jesse. Den ole Jesse ‘rub you out.’ To kill a nigger is only to rub out a black mark. Dey soon gone. And some white folk too. Dey all berry quiet when dey eat and drink poor ole Jesse’s rum and cakes. He, he! Obi Man berry good fren to Massa Ford!”

He laboured in silence and dug on until he had sunk a hole five feet deep. Next he concealed all trace of the work very carefully. He buried the pile of damp earth under dead palm leaves and brushwood, while the hole

itself he covered with twigs and trailed over them long shoots and sprays of the luxuriant snake-gourd.

Now, having made an end of this business, Jesse sought his outer gate and, posting himself there, screened his face from the glare of the risen sun and looked out with his bright, lizard eyes down the tremendous escarpments of the hill beneath him. An amazing panorama of forest, shore and sea spread below; and winding through the woods, struggling as it were with difficulty through dense undergrowth and narrow places full of cactus and thorns, there ascended a bridle-path flanked by bewildering tangles of foliage, by volcanic boulders and huge trees. Here and there through the forest flamed like fire the flowers of the *bois immortelle*; at other points, all festooned and linked together with twining and climbing parasites, or grey curtains of lace-like lichens and wind pines, arose notable forest giants, some gleaming with blossoms, some bending under wealth of fruits. And through the mingled leafy draperies of green and brown, olive and gold, under the feathery crown of the bamboo, amongst the green inflorescence of the mango, like liquid gems in the sunlight, did little humming-birds with breasts of emerald and ruby, flash and glitter. Every step or terrace in the

steep acclivities of the hills was crowned with cabbage palms or other lofty trees, and from point to point the gaunt, bleached limbs of some forest corpse stared out lightning-stricken, where the dead thing waited for the next hurricane to bring its bones to earth. Far below glimmered a white beech, and, through the woods, all silent in the growing heat, there rose a sigh of surf breaking—surf that even from this elevation could be seen lying like a band of silver between the many-tinted sea and the pale shore.

Away on the western side of the hills extended long and undulating fields of green vegetation, and in their midst arose buildings with tall chimneys and metal roofs that flashed like liquid silver under the sunshine. There extended the Pelican Sugar Estate, and indications of prosperity surrounded them; but elsewhere companion enterprises had clearly been less fortunate. In other parts of the island stagnation marked similar concerns. The plantations were deserted; the land was returning to the wilderness; the works fell into ruins.

But Jabez Ford still held the key of success, if it was possible to judge by visible signs. Tobago felt proud of him and of the Pelican Estates. Wide interest was taken in the visit of the owner's son, and none doubted but that

Ford would benefit by the circumstance and win a reward worthy of his long and honourable stewardship.

Two people understood otherwise, however, and one was Jabez Ford himself. The overseer had failed to satisfy Henry Vivian, and he knew it. The accounts were scrupulously rendered ; the staff of coolies from Bombay was happy and contented ; the sugar commanded high praise and ready sale ; but there was a disparity between the apparent prosperity and the real output. Other puzzling circumstances also much tended to increase young Vivian's doubt. Ford was an easy and convincing talker. He had an answer for every question, an explanation of every difficulty. But the fact remained : Henry Vivian disliked and distrusted him ; and Jabez knew it and did not conceal the truth from himself. An implicit duel rapidly developed between them and the elder man seemed likely to win it, for he was the stronger every way. He stood on his own dunghill and, for the present, had no intention of being removed therefrom. His private plans demanded another year for their fulfilment. Then, the richer by a sustained and skilful system of speculation, he proposed to leave Tobago and take himself and his hoard to some secret place in South America, far beyond the reach of all

former acquaintance. The sudden and unexpected advent of Henry Vivian had taxed this rascal's ingenuity severely, and the visitor's own reserve made the matter more difficult, for Sir Reginald's son investigated everything without comment and found fault with nothing. But Ford was a student of human nature and wanted no words to know that he stood in danger.

Now, as Jesse Hagan looked down from his mountain-top and waited, there rode through the deep glen below the overseer. His plans were already made. It needed only a further conference with his ancient ally to mature them. Jabez himself had black blood in his veins. His great-grandfather had been a negro, and he himself had married a Creole. This woman shared the man's life for twenty years; then death fell upon her, and it was to keep Jumbies from the body that negresses had sung all night as Daniel described to Minnie.

A glimmer of white caught Jesse's eyes far below. He heard the tramp of a horse and knew that his man was coming. Daniel still lay concealed beside the cactus fence, and through the flat and thorny leaves of opuntia, he saw Jabez Ford ride up. Jesse had disappeared for a moment into his hut, but now he came forward with a bottle and a calabash.

"Marning, massa—rum punch for massa—what Jesse get ready."

The man drank before answering, then he threw the calabash on the ground.

"I want another sort of brew to-morrow. It's got to be. I'm sorry for the young devil, for I've no quarrel with him; but he's too cute. It don't do to be too cute with Jabez Ford."

"Him rub out, sar?"

"No choice. Let me come in. I'll tell you what happened last night. He's booked."

"Dar's a nice, cool, quiet hole under de snake-gourd waitin' for Massa Vivian. He'll be berry comfable dar wid de udder gem'men."

"You talk too much," said Ford. "Come in and don't make jokes at your time of life. Think of the Devil, your master, and how precious soon you'll go back to him, Jesse."

"You my massa, sar; Jesse dun want no udder massa dan Massa Ford. Marse Debbil, he no pay such good wages as you."

Ford laughed and dismounted from his horse. He was a big, hard man, roasted and shrivelled somewhat by a life in the tropics. He always wore white ducks and a felt hat that sloped well back over the nape of his neck. His hair was black, his eyes were also black, and his face might have been considered handsome. His clean-shorn mouth showed unusual strength of

character and spoke of greed and craft as well. Tobago admired Jabez without liking him ; the little island was proud of his prosperity, but it did not trust him. His downfall would have brought sorrow to few, for many secretly suspected him of dark things. But he was strong, and not a man among his neighbours would have cared or dared to fall foul of him.

Now Ford followed the priest of Obi into his secret dwelling, where monstrous matters were hidden in the gloom and evil smells stole out of the darkness. Three dried mummies first appeared. One was a crocodile and hung from the roof ; the other two had been human beings. They sat propped in corners with a loathsome semblance of living and listening about them. Festoons of bird's eggs, curious seeds, and dried pumpkins were stretched across the ceiling ; skins of animals and birds littered the floor. Unseen things squeaked in cages ; there was a piece of red glass in the roof and through it, on to a wooden table, there fell a round, flaming eye of light which luridly illuminated the assembled horrors. Uncanny and malodorous fragments filled the corners ; filth, mystery and darkness blended here ; and across one corner of the hut hung a curtain which hid Arcanum, the Holy of Obeah Holies.

Jabez Ford sat down on a three-legged stool

by the table, and the red light shone like a sulky fire upon his dark locks. He sniffed the infamous air, then took a cigar from his case and lighted it.

Meantime, with more pluck than wisdom, and only thinking of the things that he had heard and seen, Daniel Sweetland followed close upon the heels of the strange pair. Now he stood outside the hut near the open door, and, crouching here, listened clearly to the conversation within. Beside him the tethered goat still browsed, and Ford's horse sniffed the ground for something to eat. But only the lush foliage of the snake-gourd spread within his reach, and that the beast declined. It dragged its bridle as far as possible, stamped the earth, and with unceasing swish, swish, swish of tail kept the flies from its sweating flanks.

"I'll tell you what's happened since we met," said Ford to his creature. "Last night the youngster wrote his letters home and left them with mine to be taken to the post office to catch the mail. The *Solent* sailed this morning, but she didn't take Henry Vivian's letter to his father. She took one from me instead, signed in his name. I've got his in my pocket, and it contained exactly what I expected. He makes no definite charge, because it is impossible to prove anything against me; but he states in

detail that more money is being made than appears, and advises Sir Reginald to be rid of me at once. Meantime he is going to look round the island and find a new overseer. But this little plan won't suit me. I must stop at the Pelican for another year at least. So, having unsealed and read our young friend's letter after he retired to bed, I wrote another—on my typewriter—and gave myself a better character, you may be sure. His signature was very easy to imitate, and now my letter, not his, has set sail for home. There it goes now."

He pointed below where a steamer slipped away from Tobago and the station ship, *Solent*, proceeded on her course to Trinidad and Barbados.

"My letter went in his envelope," continued Ford, "And when Sir Reginald reads it, he will be favourably impressed because I gave myself a better character than Vivian did. Of course a letter from me will reach him by the *next* mail."

"You write, too, massa?"

"Yes—I shall write—all about what is going to happen."

"I see. You tell de great man at home how his son meet wid dam sad accident and lose him life in Tobago?"

"Exactly. The boy's as good as dead. I rather wish it had been possible to avoid this; but it is not. He mustn't go home."

"He trust you?"

"Absolutely. He has no idea that I have seen through him and know that he is not satisfied. Therefore, from his standpoint, I have no reason to hate him. We are the best of friends. I am showing him all the sights and taking him all over the island. He is anxious to see everything and everybody. Of course he is on the look-out for a new overseer, but I'm not supposed to know that. Now he's excited, too, about that sailor who knocked him down yesterday. A wretched fellow off a tramp steamer. We were on the wharf watching them load turtles, when he spotted the man. Then there was a row, and my gentleman got knocked into the water. I hoped there might have been a shark cruising round! It would have saved us a deal of trouble."

"I will do all Marse shark could do, sar. A berry nice hole dug under the snake-gourd. When he come?"

"Soon. I've told him that Jesse Hagan, the Obi Man, is the first wonder of the island; so he'll be here with me to see you. Have all your war-paint on. Afterwards, I'll take his

horse away—and his boots and clothes. The rest is simple enough. They'll find the horse loose on the beach, and his garments together, and prints of feet going to the bathing-place, but none returning."

"Dar's nobody like Massa Ford!"

"We must be short and sharp. He's resolute and quick. But he's small—what's that? There's somebody moving out there!"

"My goat, sar."

But Ford had leapt to his feet and left the hut. A moment later and he stood face to face with Daniel Sweetland. The sailor was some distance from the cottage when Jabez accosted him. His back was turned and he stood on a stone and pulled down green bananas from one of the Obi Man's trees.

"Who are you and what do you do here?" asked the overseer. "You must be mad or a desperate man to run your head into this place."

The other looked innocently round. Mere temporary fear seemed to leap into his eyes at this threat. He showed by no deed or look that the truth was known to him. But Daniel had heard the course of conversation very clearly, and the necessity for swift action had forced itself upon his mind. His first idea was to leap upon Ford's horse, hasten to the Pelican

Estate, and give an alarm ; then he remembered his own position as a hunted fugitive. A plan worthy of the ingenious brain that had freed him from the handcuffs of Mr Corder swiftly dawned in the man's head. He saw the dangers waiting for Henry Vivian and for himself. In a few moments he decided upon action, and his words indicated that Daniel evidently held self-preservation the first law of nature. He left the heir of Middlecott to his fate, and played for his own hand only.

"Please, sir, listen afore you give me up," said Daniel. "Afore God I'm innocent of what this man says against me. He's a hard, cruel young devil, and many's the poor chap at home he's driven desperate. Not a spark of pity has he got, an' now I be desperate—as any hunted man would be—an' so I've climbed up here with my life in my hand to this terrible old chap they tell me about. An' I was going to ax him to help me ; but hearing voices, I just waited here till he was free. I'll pay him well for his bananas, and I'll pay him better for something else, which is to help me against that young bloodhound, Henry Vivian. I don't care what I do against him, for he'll ruin me if he can ; and if I was guilty I'd say nought, but I'm innocent. An' if I've got to swing, I'll swing for him ! That's why I comed with a

present to this here mystery man, to ax him to hide me an' help me against my enemy. An' I'll tell you something too, if you'll listen, an' that is that Mister Henry Vivian ban't no friend to you. I come from the same place he does, and I heard about it afore my own trouble at home. He'm here as a spy, an' I lay after he's gone, you'll find your goose be cooked."

This speech interested Mr Ford not a little.

"'Twas you that shot his father's gamekeeper then?" he asked ; but Daniel denied it.

"It looked bad against me—so bad that I didn't stop to talk about it, but got clear off. Time will show 'twas no work of mine, however ; an' this man, as have knowed me from my youth up, ought to be my friend—not my enemy. But since he'm against me, I'm against him, an' I'd cut his throat to-morrow if I got the chance."

The overseer nodded and turned to Jesse Hagan. Jesse had brought a gun out of his dwelling, and now deliberately pointed it at Daniel.

"Shall I shoot dis gem'man?" he inquired with his finger on the trigger. "Him berry rude young man walk in my garden widdout saying 'please,' an' eat my bananas."

"Stop!" answered Ford. "This sailor is a friend. At least I think so. No, don't shoot

him. Let him come in and give him something to eat. He's hungry."

"Lucky Massa Ford speak for you, Marse sailor-man—else you food for de 'John Crows' dis minute. But he say 'eat'; so you eat instead ob being eaten, sar."

Then Daniel entered the Obi Man's hut with Jabez Ford and old Jesse.

CHAPTER XIV

JESSE'S FINGER-NAIL

FOR an hour Jesse Hagan, Jabez Ford and Daniel Sweetland spoke in secret together. Then the overseer mounted his horse and departed, while Daniel and the Obi Man remained.

The result of this curious conference will appear. Suffice it that for many a long month no man ever saw Daniel's face again. Meantime Mr Ford resumed his attendance on Sir Reginald Vivian's son, who continued to enjoy the generous hospitality of Tobago. Hue and cry for Daniel Sweetland quite failed to find him, or any sign of him. No trace of the sailor rewarded a close and systematic search. It was supposed that he had eluded all eyes, risked the sharks, and either perished or succeeded in swimming back to his ship on the night before she sailed. But the crew knew differently. To the deep regret of James Bradley and the rest of his mates, Daniel returned to the *Peabody* no more. To wait for him could not be thought of. A black man was, therefore, shipped in Sweetland's stead,

and the old steamer, with a small cargo of cocoanuts and turtle, sailed to Barbados. Dan from his hiding-place saw her depart unmoved, for he knew not the awful fate that would soon overtake his friends. Great issues had now opened in his own life, and extreme hazards awaited him.

A fortnight passed, and the afternoon of Henry Vivian's visit to the Obi Man arrived. This event had been reserved for his last holiday in Tobago. In two days' time a Royal Mail Packet would leave the island, and by it the visitor designed to return to Barbados, that he might pick up the next vessel that sailed for home.

While he packed his cabin trunks young Vivian reviewed the events of recent weeks, and thought, not without regret, of much that had happened. The pursuit of Sweetland had caused him deep sorrow. He forgave Dan his ducking, and only mourned that his own sense of duty had made it necessary to try and secure the escaped prisoner. He would have given much to know what had become of the fugitive, and hoped against his conscience that Daniel was safe in the *Peabody*. But the young man did not doubt that Sweetland had been guilty, for evidence of his crime seemed overwhelming, and the final fact that he had

escaped from justice showed too certainly how the poacher had feared it. The circumstance of Jabez Ford's dishonesty was also material for unquiet reflections. Mr Ford acquitted himself as an ideal host, and every instinct of the guest rebelled and hurt him for the part that he must play. Vivian felt himself guilty of treachery, and it was only by keeping the truth concerning Jabez Ford resolutely in sight that he could view his courtesy, good nature, and hospitality with an easy mind. That Ford had robbed his father Henry Vivian could not question; yet he blamed himself for being so silent. He felt that he had done better and more bravely to declare his doubts and charge the other openly. Then he reminded himself that he had actually done so, that he had expressed frank dissatisfaction on many occasions, and that Jabez Ford, with imperturbable good humour, had listened to his strictures, regretted his opinions, and assured him of his mistakes. At least Vivian determined that he would not leave the overseer in any uncertainty. He had failed to find a trustworthy and experienced man to take Ford's place in Tobago; but he doubted not that such a man might be forthcoming at Barbados. Letters would reach him there from his father, and those letters Henry be-

lieved would grant him powers to dismiss Jabez Ford and appoint another overseer. He might, indeed, have to return to Tobago before leaving the West Indies. At anyrate, on the following day Ford was to lunch with Vivian on shipboard before the steamer sailed, and then Henry determined that the overseer should hear the truth, in order that he might make preparations for his departure from the Pelican Estate.

While the traveller thus decided, Jabez Ford was engaged upon a communication to Sir Reginald ; and it was this letter, and not his employer's son, that the overseer intended should travel homeward in two days' time.

The fireflies danced across the velvet darkness of night ; strange sounds of frogs echoed in the marshes, and sheet lightning sometimes outlined the dark heads of the palms as Jabez wrote. Now he sipped his grog ; now he turned his cigar in his mouth ; now he listened to the footfall of his guest on the floor above. Vivian was whistling "Widecombe Fair." Already he wearied of the tropics and began to yearn for a sight of home.

Mr Jabez Ford tapped away at his typewriter and described with many an artistic and graphic touch events that had not yet happened. He told how Henry Vivian accom-

panied him to the abode of the old negro, Jesse Hagan; how, after inspecting the Obi Man's mysteries, the visitor had ridden off alone to return to the Pelican Sugar Estate; how he had not come back, and how, protracted search being made, his clothes were discovered upon the seashore, while a single row of naked footprints were also observed leading from them to the sea. He added that young Vivian's custom was to bathe twice daily, and that on more than one occasion, disregarding warnings, he had swum in the open water instead of behind the protections of the regular bathing-place. Mr Ford left it to the sorrowing father to guess what must have happened in those shark-haunted waters. He concluded with haste to catch the mail. He promised to write again as soon as possible, and to send a message by cable if any hopeful news might be despatched.

Then, well pleased with the effort, he slept, and presently woke again refreshed to make his story good.

Soon after noon Vivian and the overseer rode together by the steep forest path to Jesse's lofty haunt, and the Obi Man in expectation prepared himself. Daniel Sweetland had vanished. Only an attendant negro waited on the master of the mysteries. All

being arranged to Jesse's satisfaction, the ancient man disappeared into an inner sanctum behind a curtain, and there completed his own horrible toilet. Upon his head he placed a fur cap with long black horns sprouting out of it, and over his lean carcase he drew hairy garments daubed with white and scarlet paint. These things were girt about his waist with a belt of feathers of the king-bird—a tropic fowl of gorgeous plumage. His arms remained bare, but to his wrists and ankles he fastened strips of lizard skin and hung bracelets of rattling seeds. About his neck he placed a chain of human teeth, and upon his breast for a loathsome amulet, the shrivelled-up mummy of a monkey hung. He next painted sundry blue hieroglyphics over his wrinkled face, and then gazed with unqualified pleasure at the general effect seen in a scrap of looking-glass.

“Obi somebody dis day!” said Jesse as he marched out into the daylight; and if he looked unearthly in the gloom of his own den, the display in full blaze of sunshine was still more terrific. He pranced hither and thither for his servant's benefit. He jingled and clashed and flamed. His fantastic adornments glittered in the light; strange treasures, unseen until now, appeared amongst his accoutrements. A brass-bound Bible hung round his neck with a

big jack-knife ; upon his knees a pair of old naval epaulettes were fastened. The ghastly thing on his breast had yellow beads stuck into its head for eyes, and now they flashed with a sort of life, whilst its little mummied arms clung about Jesse and seemed to hug him.

The attendant eyed him without awe or admiration. Jacky, as he was called, lacked some of his senses and never spoke. Then, while Jesse capered about like a monkey, down in the hot haze of the distance amid trees and rocks, the old monster suddenly saw a cavalcade struggling up the hill. Two horsemen were approaching.

Now the Obi Man retired again to complete very special and secret preparations for the hope of the house of Vivian. He withdrew behind the curtain, stooped low in his secret corner, and drew forth a box from beneath much rubbish that covered it. Next he lighted a candle, opened the box and from it took a smaller one. This contained a grey, sticky matter, like bird-lime. Digging out some of the stuff upon the point of a wooden skewer, Jesse, with his thumb, held back the flesh of his middle right-hand finger, and, under the nail, deposited the compound from the box. He plastered it there, and since all his nails were long and dirty, the presence of this strange ointment was not likely

to attract attention. He hid the box again, blew out his candle, and, returning to the air, went forward to meet his company.

The horsemen arrived and drew up before Jesse's gate as he leapt forward and bowed low, while his finery made savage music.

"By Jove! we're lucky!" exclaimed Jabez. "I told you that you should see an Obi doctor, but I never thought he would have all his war-paint on!"

"Tell him to get further off," answered Vivian. "My horse is growing restive."

"Gib you berry good day, Massa Ford; and you too, sar!" cried Jesse, bowing again and again. "Poor ole man Hagan, he berry pleased to see gem'men."

"This is Mr Vivian, Jesse," explained the overseer. "His father is Sir Reginald Vivian—the great man who owns the Pelican Estate."

Jesse saluted respectfully.

"I proud nigger dis day. Wonderful esteats—wonderful sugar esteats, massa. No canes like de canes on Pelican land. Come in, gem'men. Jacky hold your hosses and make dem fast. I'se proud to see two such gem'men in dis place."

Ford made signs to the negro, but did not speak. Then he turned to Henry Vivian.

"That's old Jesse's son," he explained. "A rare fine nigger—full-blooded and strong as a horse. But he's deaf and dumb—poor devil!—though he's got all his other wits about him."

Jacky made fast the horses and brought them a pail of water. Then Ford and the guest entered Mr Hagan's hut, and Jesse followed them. He bustled about and fetched a basket of fruit from the garden. Next he produced a bottle of rum and drew the cork with his teeth.

Henry Vivian stared and showed a very genuine interest in the strange scene around him. Mr Ford sat on a barrel in a corner and smoked his cigar.

"You've got to thank old Jesse here for more than you know," he declared. "He's been worth pounds and pounds to the Pelican; and though I can't show the profits that I'd like to show you, and hope to show you soon, yet but for this old wonder here, the figures would be far worse than they are. Two years ago a tremendous lot of sugar-cane was stolen from our plantation. The black thieves came by night—"

"He-he-he! Black tiefs come by night!" echoed Jesse.

"And took tons of the stuff. I placed the matter in the hands of the police; but it's not much good setting a nigger to catch a nigger

as a rule. The officers did no good ; then I tried the parson. But he was powerless too. So I came to Jesse, and he stopped the rascals in no time."

"Jesse stop de rascals in no time," said the old negro.

"He put your father's lands under Obeah, Mr Vivian. That doesn't mean much to you ; but we West Indians understand. All rubbish and nonsense really, perhaps, though I won't allow that myself. At anyrate, Obeah is a terrible thing to Ethiopian ears. Some survival and fragment of their ancient, infernal religion of witchcraft and unimaginable devilries. There's something in it, I believe—what, I cannot say. Our friend here is one of the last of the Obi Men, and he threw his spell over the sugar canes—hung up red rags and empty bottles on the skirts of the plantation—uttered some mumbo-jumbo spell in the ears of the frightened people and departed. It was enough. Devil another stick went."

"Debble anudder stick go ! He-he !" sniggered Jesse.

"We ought to be greatly obliged," confessed Henry Vivian. "This has been a most interesting experience, and I hope you'll accept an English sovereign from me in the name of my father, old man. Be sure I'll tell him

of your exploits and all that he owes to you."

"Gold—me like gold berry much," declared Jesse. He took the money greedily and slipped it into a pocket at his belt. "Massa King ob England on it—good!" he said.

"And now I'll depart, if you please, Ford," continued young Vivian. "I'm glad to have had this most interesting experience, but I can't stand the place any longer. The uncanny odours are choking me."

"Smoke then. We can't go immediately. The old boy would never forgive us. I'll be off as soon as I dare."

He turned to Jesse.

"Seen any turtle lately?"

"Plenty turtle, sar. I take my walks on moony nights and see de great cock turtle making a fuss and de ladies laying dar eggs in de sand. Berry good soup—but Jesse like rum better. It work quicker. You gem'men shall taste Jesse's rum punch. Nobody make rum punch like me, massa."

He made signs to Jacky, and the silent negro, who stood at the door, drew three calabash shells from a corner and took them out to wash them.

"He my son, massa," explained old Hagan. "Him no speak or hear. Him tongue tied

by de Lord. But him understand berry quick. Him understand like a dog, sar. Him know tings dat we no know, for all dat we have ears and tongues."

Vivian nodded dreamily and puffed his cigar. The vile atmosphere of the hut and Jesse's voice that ran on ceaselessly began together to hypnotise him. He felt sleepy.

"How much more of it?" he asked Ford, and the other answered—

"Not five minutes. The drink is ready. We will wish him good luck and long life. Then we will clear out. His rum punch is really worth drinking. I know nothing like it."

Meantime Jacky had rinsed out his three split calabash bowls and now placed them on the table in a row.

"Dis Obi punch I make for you, sar. Nobody make him but Jesse!" declared the host. Then he poured his concoction into the three bowls and, when he had emptied a large open pan, about half a pint of liquor filled each calabash.

"Drink and remember de poor old Obi Man, sars! Dar's yours, Massa Ford, and dar's yours, Massa Vivian; and dis am mine. Jacky and me will share and share togedder."

He handed the calabashes to his son and a

close observer might have noted that into one bowl of refreshment—that intended for Henry Vivian—Jesse dipped the long, bony middle finger of his right hand.

A moment later Jabez Ford lifted his drink and pledged the giver.

“Here’s to you, old fellow, and may your shadow never grow less. Good luck and long life to all of us!”

He drank heartily, smacked his lips, and set his empty bowl upon the table, while Vivian followed his example and drained his drink also.

“Splendid—splendid!” he said. “I’ll give you another sovereign for the secret of that!”

Jesse looked at the doomed man with his toad’s eyes.

“I fraid de secret no good whar you gwaine, massa. You dead gem’man, sar. Nuffing on God earf save you now. Five minutes more and we take off your tings and put you under Jesse’s snake-gourd, sar.”

“What the deuce is he talking about?” began Vivian. Then his jaw fell and he stared at the face of Jabez Ford. Behind them stood Jacky, and in front, on the other side of the table, the Obi Man quietly sipped his rum punch and waited.

But now a thing unforeseen occurred, and

the awful, inevitable death that had been mixed with Henry Vivian's cup fell upon another.

Jabez Ford it was who leapt to his feet, cried a hoarse oath and turned upon the negro behind him.

"Treachery — you — you—!" he began. Then he fell in a heap on the floor, twisted horribly like a snake, while his hands and feet beat the earth.

"Air—air—my God—life!" he cried, and at the same moment with a wild yell the Obi Man leapt forward and hurled himself at his son's throat. But the younger negro was ready, and in his grasp the old man's strength availed nothing. In a moment Mr Hagan was forced to the earth and Jacky, with a rope in readiness, had bound him hand and foot. His finery fell from Jesse while he shrieked and struggled and cursed. Then he sank into silence and watched Jabez Ford die.

Vivian, believing himself in some appalling nightmare, glared upon this scene; and its unreality and horror seemed increased to a climax worse than the sudden death of the overseer when the dumb negro turned upon him and spoke.

"Come!" said the man. "Come out of this! The horses are waiting. I'll tell you

what's to tell, but not here with that mad old devil screeching in our ears and t'other glaring there with death gripping his throat. Come, Henry Vivian, an' give heed to the man who has saved your life at the cost of this twisted clay here. Like him would you have been this minute but for me. 'Tis now your turn to be merciful."

"Dan ! Dan Sweetland !"

"So I be then—at your service. Come. No more till we'm out o' sight of this gashly jakes. Let that old rip bide where he be for the present. Us can come backalong for him after dark, or to-morrow."

A few moments later Sweetland, still disguised as a negro, mounted the dead man's horse, and he and his old companion rode away together.

CHAPTER XV

DANIEL EXPLAINS

“**A**FORE you think about what all this means, you’d best to hear me,” began Daniel. “I’m very sorry I throwed you in the water, Mister Henry, but ’twas ‘which he should,’ as we say to home; an’ if I hadn’t done it, you’d have had me locked up. You thought you was right to go for me; an’ I reckoned I was right to go for you. An’ I should again, for I’m innocent afore Almighty God. May He strike me dead on this here dead man’s horse if I ban’t!”

“We’ll leave your affairs for the present,” replied Vivian. “What you’ve got to do is to tell me what all this means. Then I shall know how to act.”

“That’s all right,” answered the other; “but you’m rather too disposed to be one-sided, if I may say so without rudeness. A man like me don’t care to blow his own trumpet, but I must just remind you that I’ve saved you from a terrible ugly death during the last five minutes; and I’ll confess ’twas a very difficult job and took me all my time to do it. I’ve been a

better friend to you than ever you was to me, though I know you was all for justice an' that you meant to do your duty. But you was cruel quick against me. Well, thus it stands: the world thinks I'm a murderer, an' my work in life is to prove I am not. An' that I shall do, with or without your help, sir. But if you believe the lie, say so, an' I'll know where I be. If you're my enemy still, declare it. Then if there's got to be fighting the sooner the better. But think afore you throw me over. 'Twas because I loved you, when we were boys, an' because I thought that, when you heard my story calmly, you'd come to believe in me, that I let the past go an' saved your life. So now say how we stand, please, Mister Henry. If you'm against me still, be honest and declare it. But I know you can't be. Ban't human nature after what I've just done for you."

Vivian stopped his horse.

"It's not a time for reserve, Dan. You're right and I'm wrong. You've taught me to be larger-hearted. I'll take your word, and henceforth I'm on your side before a wilderness of proofs. From this hour I will believe that you're an innocent man, and I thank you, under God, for saving my life."

He held out his hand, and Sweetland shook it as if he could never let go.

"The Lord will bless you for that! I knowed well how 'twould be when you understood. An' I hope you'll forgive me for speaking so plain; but 'twas gall to me to know you thought me so bad. If you'm on my side, an' my own Minnie at home, an' my own friend, Titus Sim—you three—then I'm not feared for anything else. I'll face the world an' laugh at it now. But first I must tell you the meaning of all that's happened to-day."

"Here's the Pelican," interrupted Vivian. "You'll do well to come in and have a wash while I send for the police."

"Washing won't get it off. I'll be so black as the ace of oaks for many a long day yet; an' maybe it's best so. 'Twas that dead man's idea that I should bide along with Jesse Hagan an' pretend to be a deaf an' dumb nigger, an' lend Jesse a hand when you arrived. A very good idea too. So long as Dan Sweetland's thought to be a murderer, he'll be better out of the way."

They entered the dwelling of Jabez Ford, while a negro took their horses.

Then Sweetland told his story from the beginning. He started with the night before his wedding, and gave every particular of his last poaching enterprise. He related how he actually heard the shot that must have slain

Adam Thorpe, and explained how he returned to Hangman's Hut, put his gun into its case, and then went home to his father's house. His wedding, arrest, and subsequent escape followed. He mentioned his ruse at the King's Oven, his visit to his wife, and his escape from Plymouth in the *Peabody*. He resumed the narrative at Scarborough, Tobago, and then related what had happened to him after flying from the wharf.

"I overheard Jesse and Jabez Ford talking, an' very quickly tumbled to it that you was a deader if you comed to see the Obi Man. I'd watched the old, grey-haired devil dig your grave already. Then I set to work to save you. Maybe 'twas a fool's trick, but I hadn't much time to think about it, so I bluffed, an' went in so bold as brass, an' said as I wanted to take your life. Well, you may guess what Ford thought of that. A desperate, half-naked, savage sailor-man was just the tool for him. They let me help Jesse, an' I make no doubt that Ford meant to turn on me afterwards, if ever he had to clear himself. He never smelt a rat—he never saw I was playing a part—I was that bitter against you. I axed the man an' begged him to let me kill you myself, an' I think he would have agreed to it; but Jesse said that 'twas his job, an' he told us he wasn't

going to have no pig-killing in his house, but ordered us to leave it to him. To the last he wouldn't tell me how he was going to do it. So I had an anxious time, I promise you. Then 'twas planned that I should be a black man, an' the old chap gived me some stuff for my face an' hands an' neck—just the colour as you see. I've got the rest up there in a bottle. Well, Ford he went off, an' Jesse told me what my part was to be. Simple enough—only to hand you your rum punch when the time came—nothing more. 'Twas all in that drop of drink. But he swore 'twasn't when I axed him afore you come. And what he put in, or how he put it in, I can't tell you. I only guessed when he handed me the drink that death was in your bowl, because he was so partickler about which was yours an' which was Ford's. So I said to myself, 'I'll change these here calabashes behind their backs, an' if one's a wrong 'un, let that crafty chap have it; an' if both be honest, no harm's done.' You see how right I was. When I seed Ford screech an' topple over, I knowed what I'd saved you from."

"But why—what did the man want to poison me for?"

"Because he'd seed through you an' knowed you'd seen through him. Because he found out you wasn't satisfied and meant to have him

turned off. I heard him tell the Obi Man the whole yarn. He read the letters you'd written your father after you'd gone to bed; an' then he took yours out an' put in others into your envelopes, an' forged your signatures to 'em. Then, when they'd got you settled, they was going to pretend you'd gone bathing an' been eaten by sharks. The story all hung together very suent an' vitty, I lay. But now he's dust himself, an', if you take my advice, you'll do what he's done afore you, an' make Jesse Hagan keep his mouth shut. No harm can come of that; then you're free to go home. Whereas, if you have the whole thing turned over to the police, there'll be the devil to pay, an' a case at Trinidad, an' lawyers, an' trouble, an' Jesse Hagan hanged, an' Lord knows what else."

"Let things go!" gasped Henry Vivian.

"Why not? Just consider. There'll be oceans of bother for you if you stir this up. Nothing better could have happened. This wicked scoundrel's taken off in the nick of time."

"Hoist with his own petard, indeed!"

"Well, he's gone—vanished like smoke—an' nobody will mourn him neither. What could suit you so well? Forget you know anything about it. Why not? All you can do

is to hang Jesse Hagan for his share. But, if you arrest him, so like as not he'll turn round on me an' say I done it. Then my name comes in, an' I'd very much rather it didn't just at present."

They argued long upon this theme, but Vivian would not give way. His sense of justice and honour made him refuse to let the matter drift, and Daniel's worldly-wise advice fell on deaf ears. They made a meal, and the negroes who served it looked curiously at the silent coloured man, who ate with their master's guest; for while others were present Daniel kept dumb. Then, as the day advanced, the horses were again saddled, and Vivian, with Sweetland, rode off to the hut of Obeah.

While the attendants stared to see a ragged negro galloping off on Jabez Ford's horse, Dan attempted again to convince Henry Vivian that a cynical silence would for the present best meet the case. It was only the thought of Sweetland's own position, if all came to be laid bare, that made the other hesitate. Vivian, indeed, found himself still in doubt when they returned to the summit of the hill, tied their horses to the opuntia hedge, and returned to Jesse's dim dwelling.

Profound silence reigned there, and the hut was empty. Neither the distorted corpse of

Jabez Ford nor any sign of the Obi Man himself appeared. Hunting in a corner, Daniel found the bottle of dye which had served so effectually to disguise him; and at the same moment Henry Vivian discovered a scrap of paper on the table under the red eye of light that fell from the roof upon it.

"Jesse larf at ropes and bars, but Jesse no larf at Massa Judge at Trinidad who hang him. Jesse tired, so him go to bed along with other gem'men and Marse Ford under the snake-gourd in him garden."

Daniel rushed out to find this statement true. The Obi Man had flung Ford into the grave prepared for Henry Vivian. He had then jumped in himself and, with a long knife that lay beside him, had severed the arteries of his thighs. A storm of insects rose up and whirled away from the ghastly grave.

"Where's his spade?" cried Daniel. "Even you will grant there's but one thing to do for 'em now."

"My duty's hard to know," declared Vivian.

"Then leave it," answered the other. "Here's Fate busy working for you. Why for keep so glum about it? Let me advise, for I know I'm right. Take the next ship home an' set out all afore your faither. He'll say what's proper to do. I'll bury these sinners, an' you

can bear the tale home along; an' when he's heard all, Sir Reginald will know very well how to act. Trust him!"

"And you, Sweetland?"

"I'll tell you what I think about myself so soon as I be through with this job. One thing's clear as mud: the sooner we're out of Tobago the better. If you can only trust the second in command at the Pelican works to carry on for the present, I say 'be off.' Then this scarey business will right itself. The bad man fades away from memory. His sins are forgotten. Never was a case where silence seemed like to suit everybody best an' do the least harm."

In his heart Henry Vivian felt somewhat nettled to find an untutored man rising to strength of character and practical force greater than his own at this crisis. But he could not fail to feel the sense of Dan's advice. Moreover, he was awake to the immense debt he owed to Sweetland.

That night, while fireflies danced over the raw earth of the grave under the snake-gourd, Henry Vivian and the sailor held solemn speech together. They talked for hours; then Daniel had his way.

It was at length determined that Sir Reginald's son should return home at once. Having

yielded slowly to Dan's strong entreaties in this matter, Vivian asked a question.

"And what do you do, Sweetland? Or, I should ask, what can I do for you? Your welfare is mine henceforth. This tragedy has merely obscured the problem with respect to you. I return home and convince my father that what has happened was really for the best. We will take it that he agrees, presently appoints a new overseer, and leaves this scoundrel in his unknown grave. So much for me and the issue of my affairs; but now what happens to you, my lad? One thing is to the good: you'll have the governor on your side when he hears you saved my life."

"Well," answered Dan, "I was waiting for us to come to my business. To tell you the truth, I've thought of myself so well as you, Mister Henry. An' this is what I've got to say. You'll think I've gone cracked, I reckon, yet I beg you'll hear me out, for I've given a lot of thought to the matter, you may be sartain; an' mad though it do sound, if you think of it, you'll see that 'tis about the only way. If you count that you owe me ought, I beg you'll fall in with my plan; then I shall be in your debt for everlasting."

"I owe you everything, Dan. I owe it to you that I'm not dead and buried in that old

fiend's garden, where he lies himself. Tell me what's best to be done for you, and be sure if it's in my power that I'll do it."

"Well, 'tis this way; you believe in me; you take my oath I'm honest. But the world don't. I can't go back to England and stand up an' say 'I didn't do it, neighbours,' because the Law's up against me an' there's nought but short shrift an' long drop waiting for me as things are. But—"

"Stop here, then, for the present."

"That won't do neither. I've gotten a feeling pulling at me like horses, to get home. I'm wanted there. My girl wants me. I know it."

"How's that to be done? Show your nose on the countryside and you'll be arrested."

"So I should be—such a nose as mine, for there's no mistaking it; but how if I bide the colour I be now?"

"Go home black!"

"Why for not? 'Tis that I ax of you, sir, as payment for saving your life. You take me back as your black servant. I'm dumb, but I'm such a treasure that you can't get on without me. Do it! Do it for love of a hardly-used man! I'll ax it on my knees, if you say so. Let me go back with you as your nigger sarvant, an' if I don't clear myself in six months

from the day I set foot in England, then I'll clear out altogether and trouble you no more. The man's living that killed Adam Thorpe, and who more likely to worm out the truth than I be, with such a motive to find it as I've got? There I'll bide patient an' quiet an' dumb as a newt, an' I'll work for you as never man yet worked. I beg you let me do this—by my faith's good name an' for love of my mother an' my little lonely wife, I beg you. You'll never regret it—never. 'Tis a good deed and will stand to your credit in this world so well as t'other."

"They'll find you out. Sim will see through you, and your father will. Who can forget your size and your walk?"

"Don't fear that. Such things be forgotten quick enough. Not a soul will know so long as I keep my mouth shut; an' that I'll do for my neck's sake, be sure of it. Not a soul living will guess. I only ax for six months. Then I'll vanish again, if I haven't found some damned rascal to fill my shoes. An' this I will bet; that my own mother don't know me. With my curly hair an' black eyes I was half a nig afore I comed here. Now I'm nigger all over. The coloured men here think I am, anyhow, for they axed me who I was, an' where I comed from, an' where Marse Ford

was got to. But I just pointed to my mouth an' shook my head, so they all think I'm dumb."

"It might be better at home if they thought that you were deaf too," reflected Vivian. "Since you're so set on this experiment, I must fall in with it. I owe you too much to refuse."

"I knowed you would! Wasn't we boys together? Bless your good heart, sir! You'll never be sorry—never. I'm yours, body an' soul, for this—yours to be trusted an' ordered while life's in me."

"So be it, Daniel; and, after your own wife, there's no human being will be better pleased to see you proved guiltless than I shall. And what I can do to help you and justice, that will I do. Now our way is clear and we will waste no time."

"Ban't my business to speak any more then," answered Sweetland. "For the future I'll keep my mouth shut and obey. But one thing you must do; an' that is cable home the first moment you get to Barbados. Ford sent his letter by the last station ship, an' you can't stop it. Your father will hear that you've been eaten by sharks. That'll be likely to worry him bad. Anyway, you'll have to telegraph an' explain that you're all right an' on the way to home."

"There's another steamer that sails in two days' time. To-morrow we'll institute a solemn search for Ford; I'll appoint his clerk as temporary overseer; and we'll get back to Barbados and take the first home ship."

"'Tis just the very thing," said Dan.

"You must sleep in my cabin, that's clear."

"Good Lord, no! Who ever heard of a common nigger in his master's cabin, sir?"

"It's unusual, no doubt; but you certainly can't go with the other servants, or share any other cabin than mine, Dan."

"Why ever not, Mister Henry?"

"For the simple reason that when you turn in at night you'll take your clothes off, I suppose; and a nigger with black face and hands and a white body might give rise to a little discussion."

Sweetland roared with laughter.

"There now, if I didn't forget that!" he said.

"The sooner you remember these difficulties the better, Dan, for your part will be hard enough to play at best," his new master answered.

"I know it; but I'll think of my neck, Mister Henry. That'll steady me. An' I'll think of you, too, sir. If I come well out of it,

an' save myself, I'll never tire of thanks an' gratitude."

Events fell out as the Englishman expected. Search for Ford failed, and the excitement occasioned by his disappearance ran high. As for Jesse, the old negro's absence raised no alarm, because the Obi man often hid himself and vanished into the woods for many days together. A young Creole was appointed temporary overseer at the Pelican, and Sweetland, in his character of a deaf and dumb negro, returned with Henry Vivian to Barbados.

Sir Reginald received a telegram three days before Jabez Ford's letter reached him, and ere he had ceased to wonder concerning the mystery, his son and Daniel were on their way home in the Royal Mail steamer *Atrato*.

CHAPTER XVI

“ OBI ” AT MORETON

THE red-gold light of evening beat into the bar of the White Hart Inn at Moretonhampstead, and its rich quality imparted a lustre not only to the shining pewter, the regiments of bottles, and the handles of the beer-engines, but also to the countenances of several customers. The day's work was done ; a moment for leisure had fallen ; and it happened that amongst those that evening assembled were many known to us as well as to each other.

Mr Beer and Mr Bartley drank together and discussed the times from different points of view ; but both agreed that they were bad. The constable deplored their quietude, for nothing ever happened to advance his interests or offer him an opportunity ; and Mr Beer protested that history grew more and more colourless. For a week there had happened nothing to inspire so much as a couplet. Plenty of incident, however, fell out before the publican had finished drinking. Titus Sim dropped in

and a murmur greeted his arrival, for behind him walked a tall negro. The black man was clothed in a long coat that reached to his feet, and a big slouch hat came low over his forehead and concealed most of his brows.

"'Tis Mister Henry's new servant," explained Sim. "He's deaf and dumb, poor beggar, but harmless as an infant. I'm just taking him for an airing."

The company regarded this man, thus removed from them by barriers impassable, with great interest.

"How do you make him understand?" asked Bartley.

"All by signs. There are a few very simple signs, and he knows them. Never was a creature less trouble, and certainly as a valet he couldn't be beat. He looks after the new motor-car, too; but there's a doubt if he can drive it, being deaf."

Titus tapped a glass and the black man nodded and grinned.

"Give him rum and water, please; he don't drink nothing else. He comes from Tobago, where the Vivian sugar estates are, you know. I asked Mister Harry however he could choose a poor lad minus two senses, and he said they were senses that a valet might do without. And so he can. Only we've got to tell him when

his master's bell goes. He can't hear anything."

"To think how many of these poor black varmint was choked off like flies when poor Dan Sweetland died," said Mr Beer. "He's a fine figure of a man for all his blackness, and since he's deaf and dumb, he can't do much evil. Though whether the devil creeps into us more through the ear than the eye be a nice question. Why, he'd be almost handsome if he wasn't such a sooty soul."

"Mister Henry has a good word for the niggers and says they'm just as teachable as dogs every bit. But the whites out there have given him more trouble than all the blacks put together."

"They'm all human creatures, and their colour don't count for nought in the eye of Heaven," said an ancient man who sat in the corner. He was mostly in shadow, but his nose and hands caught the red sunshine.

"We'm all corn for the Lord's grindstones," he continued; "black or white—oats or wheat, neighbours. Rich and poor, Christian and heathen will all be ground alike; and them with horses and carriages and servants will be scat just so small as us. And that's a very comforting thought to me, as have suffered from the quality all my life."

Mr Beer shook his head.

"Your Radical ideas will undo you yet, Gaffer Hext," he answered. "But 'tis the way of Hext to be ever vexed. Principalities and powers was always a thorn in the flesh to him. Yet, when all's said, the uppermost folk pay the wages ; and where's the workers without 'em?"

"Hext never had no luck with his wife, you see. It have soured your spirit—eh, gaffer?" asked Mr Bartley.

"That's no reason he should be a born Socialist an' plan what's going to happen at the end of the world," replied Johnny Beer. "The Last Judgment ban't his business, I believe. An' whether the quality will be scat in pieces is an open question, if you ax me. They've got plenty to put up with so well as us. Look at what Quarter Day means to them—a tragedy ; no doubt. And think how income-tax scourges 'em ! No ; for my part I don't reckon 'tis all fun being a man of rank. I dare say Sir Reginald envies Sim here sometimes. There's nought like care to thin the hair, and many a red-cheeked chap as smiles at market and rides a fine hoss, be so grim as a ghost behind the scenes, when there's nobody to see and hear him but his wife."

The black man tapped his tumbler again. It was empty.

“He may have one more,” said Titus, “then I must set him going. Mister Vivian calls him ‘Obi’; but I think he’s invented the name. Obi is a sort of religion out there among the black people, I hear tell. There’s been an awful deal of trouble over our estates, by all accounts, and the old overseer has bolted, or something—don’t know the particulars. But there’s money in sugar yet. Only last night I heard Sir Reginald say to his son, ‘The man gives you excellent advice. I shall not stir the dark depths of that business, but appoint a new overseer immediately—one who is honest and has our interests at heart.’”

“I suppose it’s not a job within the reach of the likes of me?” hazarded Mr Bartley. “I wouldn’t mind a warm climate at all, and I wouldn’t mind a change. My chance is gone—I feel that. Ever since the affair of Daniel Sweetland—”

“You was hookwinked in company.”

“That don’t make it better. And Corder be in high favour again—just because he caught that chap as killed his wife to Ashburton. To think Sweetland didn’t jump down Wall Shaft Gully after all! A crafty soul, a very first-rate rascal.”

"Don't you speak like that," said Sim, sharply. "Sweetland's gone; but I ban't, and 'tis pretty well known we were better than brothers. 'Twasn't him that was crafty, but you and t'others that were fools. His craft got him free, and he died like a man in the hand of God, not like a dog in the hand of man. I am speaking of your son, Matthew," he continued, for at that moment Sweetland the elder had entered the bar. He was grey, silent, morose as usual. Upon his left arm he wore a mourning band.

"Can't his name rest? Ban't it enough he's gone to answer for his short life, an' taken the secrets of it along with him?" asked the father. "A drop of gin cold," he added; then he turned and looked at the tall, dumb Ethiopian who was regarding him.

"God's truth!" he said harshly, "if that savage ban't built the very daps of my dead boy—the very daps of un, if he wasn't black!"

The others regarded the stranger critically, and "Obi" grinned about him and tapped his glass again. But Sim shook his head.

"No more, my lad. You must be moving soon. He's Mister Henry's servant," he continued to Sweetland—"a poor, simple, afflicted creature, but true and faithful; and wonderful smart, ^{for} seeing he can't hear or speak. He

saved Mister Henry's life in some row he had in foreign parts, and now he's thought the world of. Providence was looking after him, I reckon. He'll drive the new motor so like as not, if it can be proved his deafness don't matter."

Sweetland still regarded the coloured man with interest. Then he turned to his glass. Presently he spoke to Beer.

"How's it with you?" he asked. "A man may get a merry answer from you; and for my part, being near the end of my days, I shun sorrow where it can be done. Though it meets you everywhere. There's nought else moving in town or country."

"Don't think it, Matthew," urged the publican. "Sorrow be like a lot of other things; go to meet it and 'twill come half way. Put off sorrow till to-morrow, and very often you can stave it off altogether."

"It's no time for mourning either," continued Titus. "It's the time to be busy. Dan be gone; the memory of him be here. 'Tis for us to round off his history and let him be remembered as an honest man. And maybe afore a week's out, 'twill be done."

"Obi" had his glass in his hand, and at this noble sentiment he dropped it suddenly and it broke to pieces.

He shrugged his shoulders and produced twopence from his pocket and placed them on the counter.

"He've got his intellects, evidently. He knows it costs money to break glass," said Bartley. "That one may say for him."

"That he has," assented Titus. "And as good-tempered as a bull-dog. Where's my parcels? I must be going. Have you seen your daughter-in-law, Matthew?"

"Yes," answered the gamekeeper. "I gave her a lift to Moreton. She's gone to her aunt's. She told me to tell you that she'd be in the yard of the White Hart afore seven o'clock. I hear poor Rix Parkinson be set on speaking to her afore he dies."

"Yes; we're going there now. Much may come of it."

"A wasted life," mused Mr Beer. "An' a man of great parts was Rix Parkinson. God never made such a thirst afore. He'll have to lift that excuse at Judgment—not that excuses will alter the set of things there. Yet they'm a part of human nature come to think of it. Adam's self began it. He ate of the tree, then said 'twas she. Drunkard Parkinson's cruel thirst have driven him from bad to worse; and though he often had D.T.'s, he never was seen upon his knees. If I had to write his

tombstone, that would be the rhyme of it," said Mr Beer.

"'Tis wrong to admire him, but I never could help doing so," confessed Sim. "As a sportsman myself, I always felt his cleverness. He've had many and many a bird as you bred, Matthew."

"If he knows ought as would clear Daniel, I'll forgive him all," answered the old keeper.

"I hope to goodness it may be so," replied Titus. "My ear will be quick to hear it, I promise you. And this I'd say: leave it to Mrs Sweetland's good time. If poor Parkinson have got any dark thing to get off his conscience, he won't want it brought to the light of day while yet he lives."

"You make my flesh creep," said Beer. "Why for don't the man call parson to him? You can only hear; but parson can both hear and forgive."

The ancient in the corner spoke again.

"Don't you know no wiser than that rot? You read your Bible better, Johnny Beer, an' you'll very soon find that nobody can forgive sins but God alone. An' I lay it takes Him all His holy time, with such a rotten world as this."

"No politics," said the man behind the bar.

"No politics, an' no religion, Mister Hext, if you please."

"You'm getting too cross-grained to deal with, gaffer," answered Mr Beer, mildly. "'Tis well known in a general way that the clergy have power to forgive sins; an' 'tis a very proper accomplishment, come to think of it, for their calling. Now, for my part—"

In the yard a voice broke into Beer's argument, and a venerable rhyme ascended from an ostler's throat :—

"Old Harry Trewin

Had no breeches to wear,

So he stole a ram's skin

To make him a pair.

The skinny side out

And the woolly side in,

And thus he doth go—old Harry Trewin!"

"There's a proper song for 'e!" said Bartley. "When you can turn a verse like that, you may call yourself a clever chap, John Beer."

"The rhyme's nought—'tis the tune," retorted Beer. "The verse be very vulgar, and so's the subject. You don't understand these things, as how should a policeman? Take *Widecombe Fair* even. 'Tis the tune of thicky that folks like. Never was foolisher verses."

A little figure crossed the inn yard, and Sim leapt up. "Obi" followed, carrying certain

parcels that the footman had brought with him. Matthew Sweetland stared at the tall, retreating figure in its long strangely-cut coat.

"The very cut of his shoulders," he said; but nobody was listening to him.

In the yard Sim saw Minnie waiting for him. She wore black.

"I'm quite ready, Mrs Sweetland, if you are," he said. Then he took off his hat to her.

Minnie nodded.

"I have come to see Mr Parkinson. It's just time. Is that the poor negro that Mister Henry has brought home with him?"

"Yes. A fine fellow for all his afflictions."

The widow stared fixedly at "Obi." The black man drew in his breath and endured the ordeal. But he did not face her and grin. He turned his eyes away. He believed that if his hands had not been full of parcels, they must have gone round her.

"He is deaf and dumb, poor creature," said Titus.

"Is Mister Henry going to keep him?"

"Yes."

"Won't he be cold in the winter? To think—to think! His eyes have seen all the things that my Daniel wrote about! He may have seen Dan's dear self!"

The parcels fell; but "Obi" only stooped

quickly and picked them up again. He remembered in time the appalling fright that his black paws would bring to Minnie if they closed suddenly around her. He turned and went his way, then, looking round, he was in time to see Titus offer his arm to Minnie Sweetland and to mark that she refused it.

The black man winked great tears out of his eyes. He had not cried since he was a child.

"My own li'l, dear, dinky wife! The shape of her—the lovely voice of her! 'Won't he be cold in the winter?' She axed that. 'No, by God, he won't!' I had 'pon the tip of my tongue to tell her. But 'tis lucky I held it in, for it might have spoilt all."

Deep in thought, Daniel returned to Middlecott Court. At the lodge gates he stood a moment, and stared up at the metal Diana with the bullet-hole under her breast. Once he had thought her a remarkable curiosity. Now, since his eyes had seen some of the world's wonders, she seemed a poor thing upon her lofty pedestal. Somebody moved at the lodge gate and he knew that it was his mother. Instinctively he turned his head away and hurried forward.

There are no more profound disguises than a silent tongue and a black face. Even Titus Sim had not the least suspicion that Sweetland

now lived at his elbow and listened to his every utterance. But Sim's subtle genius never deserted him. No man had heard him say one unkind word of Daniel ; many had listened to his fierce reproofs when others ventured to criticise the vanished man. Perfectly he played his part, and Daniel often warmed to the friend who could thus defend him and fight for his good name, even though, with the rest of the world, he supposed that his old comrade was dead and buried deep in the blue waters of the Caribbean.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CONFESSION

R IX PARKINSON had been a handsome man, but now disease and the shadow of death were upon his countenance ; he had long sunk into a chronic crapulence, and only his eyes, that shone from a wasted and besotted face, retained some natural beauty. He was dying, but vitality still flashed up in him, and no physician could with certainty predict whether a week or a month might remain to him. Parkinson's home adjoined that wherein young Samuel Prowse lived with his mother ; and this woman it was who of her charity ministered to the sufferer, and carried out the doctor's orders.

"Blood is thicker than water," said a neighbour. "Why for don't the man's relations come to him?"

But Mrs Prowse shook her head. "An' Christianity's thicker than blood," she answered. "As for the poor soul's relations—why 'tis surely given to the Christian to scrape kinship with all the sick an' the sorrowing? 'Tis our glory and our duty to do it."

This good woman knew Minnie Sweetland

well, and had known her since her childhood. Now she opened the door of Parkinson's cottage to the widow and Titus Sim.

"He'm ready and waiting," said Mrs Prowse. "He've just awoke from a long sleep, an' be strong as a lion for the minute, and out of pain seemingly. Come in an' let him say what he will to you while strength's with him."

They followed her into the sick room, where Rix Parkinson sat up in bed with a blue shawl wrapped round him. At his elbow was a table with bottles and a Bible upon it.

"You be come? Well, I'm glad of it. I won't waste words, for my wind grows scanty. Sit here, young woman, please; an' you leave us, mother. But don't go far. I don't like to see you out of my eyes so long as they be open."

Mrs Prowse smiled at him and departed. Sim sat on one side of the sick man and Minnie took her place upon the other.

For a moment he was silent, breathing slowly and looking up at the ceiling. Then he spoke.

"They've given me the credit for a lot of night work in the free trade way with hares and pheasants as I didn't do; but, against that, nobody's never blamed me for a lot of things as I did do. For instance, the business of Adam Thorpe—there was only one name ever

cropped up in that—your husband's. I seed him took away after you was married; and I laughed and said in the open street, 'Lucky's the he that gets that she!' Meaning you, young woman. But God's my judge, if it had gone further I should have told what I know about it. 'Tis only them as be careful of their skins that come to harm in the world. If you don't care a curse what happens to you, the devil makes you his own care. Two men was in the row when Adam Thorpe got his last dose, and I was one of 'em. T'other be going strong still, but he don't come into this story; and his name ban't Daniel Sweetland; an' it wasn't him as shot Adam Thorpe. I done it. I didn't go out to do it; but 'twas him or me as it chanced. I had to stop him, or he'd have stopped me. He bested me once afore—long ago—an' I wasn't going to let him do it again. So I shot him and fired low, hoping to stop him without killing him. But his time had come. So much for that. I went my way and made little doubt but the police would smell out the truth, for I'd done nought to hide it. But I heard nothing until next morning. Then there comed the news that Thorpe was dead, and that Dan Sweetland's new gun had been found alongside the place where he was shot. That interested me, and I began to wonder

what my pal had been up to. There was no chance to ax him just then. 'Twas his affair, anyway, not mine. And then I began to take a new interest in my life and find out what a damned fine thing it was to be alive and free. They nabbed Sweetland and I watched 'em do it. If it had come to hanging, I'd have given myself up for him ; but instead of that, he gived 'em the slip. And the rest you know. Now he's dead, they tell me, and, as I shall be after him afore the corn's ripe, I want to clear his memory for evermore. He had no hand in that job, and, so far as I know, wasn't within miles of the place. The matter of the gun be on my pal's shoulders. He denied it when I taxed him. But right well I know that he put it there for his own ends. I'll say no more about that. But God in Heaven can witness that I'd never have let 'em hang Daniel. My pal and me had one or two other little affairs afterwards, as we'd had many before ; then my health gived way, an' now I'm rotting alive and sha'n't be sorry to go. Ax any questions you like. Mr Sim here will testify to what I've told you. I'll swear afore my Judge that every word be true. As to Thorpe, I didn't go that night to kill him ; but if there was a man I should have liked to settle with, 'twas him. I slept no worse for it. If your husband

had lived an' got penal servitude, 'twas my intention to tell you the truth on my deathbed, as I have now; but not otherwise—unless they'd given him the rope. Then I'd have confessed an' took it. That's the living truth. He's died afore me, after all; but now that you know how 'twas, his memory's clear, and you can tell the world all about it so soon as I be gone."

There was a silence; then Parkinson spoke again.

"I'm not hopeful to see Dan upalong; for 'twould be awful 'dashus for the like of me wi' my sporting career, to count on Heaven; but I've done what I can to atone. Any way, if I do come up with Daniel Sweetland—whether 'tis the good place or the bad—this I'll tell him: that his memory be clear an' that 'tis known to Moreton he was guiltless. 'Twill be a comfort to the man, I should think—wherever he bides."

A wonderful look rested on the face of Minnie Sweetland. For a moment pure thankfulness filled her soul; then there came gratitude into it. To dwell upon the past was vain; to ask this perishing wretch why he had kept silence when her husband was taken from her; to wring her hands or weep for the woful past—these things at any time were deeds foreign to

the woman's nature. Her mind was practical. It had in it now no room for more than thankfulness and gratitude. She uttered a wordless and silent prayer—a thanksgiving that flashed through her heart in a throb; then she turned to the penitent and took his hand between hers.

“May a merciful Lord be good to you for this,” she said gently. “May you rest easier and die easier for knowing that you’ve righted my innocent husband’s memory and lifted darkness from the heads of his father and his mother. And mine—mine! You told me nought I didn’t know in my heart, for from his own lips ’twas spoken to me that he’d not done it or dreamed of it; but now the world can know. Nought will be hidden any more. All living men, as have ever heard my Daniel’s name, shall hear ’tis an honourable name—a name that I’ll go down to my grave proud of. ’Twill make my life easier to live—easier to bear; ’twill sweeten it till my own short years be run an’ I go back to him for ever.”

Titus Sim listened and said nothing; but he felt the scene sharply. His brows were down-drawn and her words made him suffer.

At last, with an effort, he spoke to Parkinson.

“We must leave you now. Your strength has been taxed enough. This is a good day for all of us—a day to make man trust surer in

his God and in the power of right. Say no more of this to any soul, Rix Parkinson. You've done your duty, and 'twill weigh for you in Heaven and lift you up at the end."

"You'll let me die in peace?" asked the sick man. But he spoke to Minnie: from the first moment of their entry he turned to her, and only her.

"Be sure of that. What avails to trouble your last hours now? Nothing shall be said till you're asleep."

"Don't be gentle to me—ban't in human nature. I don't ax that. I don't ax you to forgive or to forget what an everlasting rascal I've been."

"I do forgive you," she said.

"Why, then Dan will; an' God will! Be He behind His own men and women in love an' kindness? Now I can die laughing. To think 'twas in human power of a wife to forgive me!"

"Come," said Sim. "We will leave him now."

Titus rose and turned to get his hat. He was only removed from them a moment, but in that space the sufferer beckoned Minnie with his eyes and she leant her head towards him.

"Don't marry that man!" he whispered

under his breath; then continued aloud, to mask his message, "Good-bye—say, 'good-bye' to a sinner, who yet can go fearless now—ay, an' thankful too. Fearless an' thankful, because you could forgive him. 'Tis your goodness, widow Sweetland, that has lifted me to trust the goodness of God; 'tis your pardon hath made me trust in His. I'll go to my punishment without flinching or fearing, for I know He'll forgive me at the end."

Mrs Prowse entered with food for the sick man, and Minnie and Sim took their eternal leave of him.

Within half an hour Parkinson was again sleeping peacefully, and while Titus ran home without stopping, for he was late, Minnie walked slowly to the Moor. Her sad face shone with this blessed news. She longed to cry from the housetops; she thirsted to tell each passer-by that her husband was innocent of the evil linked with his name. She thought of his mother first and then his father; she even felt more tenderly towards Titus Sim for the deep joy he had expressed on hearing the truth; but presently the living faded from her memory and she was in thought alone with her husband. At Bennett's Cross, hard by Warren Inn, an impulse moved her from the lonely road to the lonely stone. And she passed over the heath and knelt by

the ancient granite carved into the symbol of her faith. She knelt and prayed and so passed on, much uplifted by the blessing of the day. She moved forward thankful, grateful for this unutterable good, strong to endure her life without him, fortified to face an existence which, like the faded yet lovely passage of an Indian Summer, should not lack for some subdued goodness, should not be void of beauty and content. The power to do good remained with her ; she repined no more ; her native bravery rose in her heart. She looked out fearless and patient upon the loneliness to come, and in that survey she intended that a memory would be her beacon, not a man. The dying drunkard need have felt no fear for Daniel's widow. It was not in her nature to marry again.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE

THE accident of illness prevented Henry Vivian from visiting Minnie in her home, as he intended. A bad chill struck him down soon after returning home, and for some days there was a fear that the evil would touch his lungs and become serious. Dan nursed him. He ran no small risk of detection, but escaped for three days. Then his master gained strength, and, since he could not visit Mrs Sweetland, his first act was to write to her and entrust the letter to her husband.

Daniel duly posted it and the man whose duty it was to deliver the note at Hangman's Hut left it with Mr Beer at the Warren Inn.

Johnny put it aside until his wife should presently visit Minnie; but it happened that the note was overlooked until evening. Then, after nine o'clock, Titus Sim called upon his way to Mrs Sweetland, and he, after all, was the bearer of the great communication which told Dan's wife that she was not a widow.

Events now rushed upon each other with

such speed that to tell the story of them in exact sequence becomes difficult. For the present we are concerned with the meeting between Sim and the woman he desired to marry.

At another time Sim would have inspected the letter that he carried and, perhaps, noting that it came from Henry Vivian, whose hand he well knew, the footman, in obedience to his instincts, might have mastered the contents before delivering it. But Sim was full of his own affairs to-night. They had reached a climax. Much hung upon the next few hours, and his own devious career was destined to culminate before another sun rose. A great enterprise awaited him, and upon it he now prepared to embark.

Minnie sat alone beside her lamp, and the man approached her with his face full of news. Something in the way that he touched her hand told her of what was coming.

"Rix Parkinson is dead!" she cried.

"He is, Minnie; but how did you know that?"

She marked his use of her Christian name. It savoured of a sort of insolent right, and she resented it with a look, but not in words. Then she replied to his question.

"I knew it the moment that you came in,

Mr Sim. Your face told me. He has not left us long to wait, poor fellow."

"He went easily."

"We must wait until the earth closes over him, then my Dan—"

"There is one thing first."

He put his hand into his pocket and felt the letter.

"I had forgotten. Beer gave me this for you. But first listen to me. You can read when I have gone."

"Speak," she said, and put the letter on the mantelshelf.

"I've said it once before, but you had no ears then, for your eyes were full of that terrible news from the West Indies. By some sad trick Providence willed that I should actually be asking you to marry me at the moment when you saw the fact of your husband's death staring at you in print. Of course I said no more then. But now 'tis different. Now you know that poor Dan is at rest and is happy. Now you know he was innocent of that awful charge. Your soul is at peace too. You and I have the power to clear his name in the sight of the world. That is as good as done. Only days remain. And afterwards, Minnie? I have a right to ask that question now. Have I not earned my reward?

God knows I've waited patiently enough. I've been loyal to you and to him. I've proved my friendship; and if I'd had to put down my life to clear Dan's name I'd have done it. What follows? You know what I mean. I've waited long enough. I've been patient."

"You want me to marry you?"

"You must; you shall. I'm only flesh and blood—not stone. I've waited at a cost to myself none knows. I've endured untold torments. My passion for you has shortened my days. To hide those burning fires was a task crueller than woman has a right to ask from man. You're a human creature. You must love me—if 'tis only for my love of your dead husband you must love me. Say you'll marry me—say it quick. Let my sleep be sweet this night; let care and fear and dread share my pillow no more."

"Who was it planned this evil against Daniel Sweetland? We know who killed poor Adam Thorpe; but who killed my husband? Find that out, Titus Sim."

"If man can, I will; but leave that for the present. I'm as set on it as you. 'Tis the task first to my hand after we are man and wife."

"Man and wife we never shall be. I'd sooner far, and prouder far, be my Daniel's widow than wife of any man. No call to stare.

Stare into your own heart, not into my face. I'll never marry anybody. Let that content you. You've done your work ; now go your way."

"You'd drop me so? By God! you make my fingers itch! D'you know what lies between love and hate? A razor-edge. Don't scorn me so cold and cruel. Don't turn away from the worship of a man whose very life be built upon your nod. I can't stand that. 'Tis fatal. My days are nought to me without you. They are narrowed to a word ; you, you, you! Think what I can give you if you've no liking for myself. I've got heaps of money—a small fortune. Hundreds of pounds—all for you. Never another stroke of work. Your own servant you shall have ; and your own slave, too. I'll be that. Let me show you what love for a woman is—what love for a woman can do. Be content to share life with me. Don't drive me mad by saying 'no' again. Don't turn my love into gall. For 'twill be poison, and that poison will mean death."

"I must face all that you can threaten," she said. "I've spoken. I'll marry no man. 'Tis enough to live alone with the blessing of my Dan's good name."

"That rests with me!" he answered. "Don't fool yourself to think everything's going as you

please. If you will make me show my teeth, 'tis your fault, not mine. I'm human. I've fought and toiled and sweated for you, and only you. I've done deeper things than ever a man did for love of you. Grey's come into my hair for love of you. And now—? No, by God! the time's ripe for payment. There's only two living souls on earth know that Daniel Sweetland's innocent of murder, and them two must be man and wife, or that man's memory shall stink of blood for evermore! That's love! You stare, but I've spoken. You refuse me, but in so doing you leave your husband's memory foul. Your testimony is nothing without mine. 'Tis an easy invention for a pious wife; but when they come to me, I shake my head and say 'I fear the wish was father to the thought, for Parkinson said no such thing.' Tell them! I'd rather die than tell them. I'll cut my own throat rather than clear him. That's love on the razor-edge. And a mind on a razor-edge too! I'm at a pass now when life or death be bubbles. You've made me desperate. You don't know—you can't guess—a girl like you with ice for a heart—what a man's raging fires may be. Speak—don't look at me with them steady, watch-fire eyes, or I'll strangle you!"

She had never seen any man driven into a desperation that came so near actual madness.

She was alive to her own danger, and yet, knowing a thing hidden from him, could spare a moment of thankfulness at her own prescience in the past. For Minnie had never trusted Titus Sim. Even before the prospect of going with him into the presence of death, she had feared his honesty. Because she knew him to be a liar, and believed him capable of any crime.

"Leave me now," she said steadily, with her eyes upon his face. "This be no time for more speech between us. You have declared that my dead husband's innocence hangs upon your speech. To prove him honest is all the world's got left for me to do. And I will do it. At any cost—even to marriage with you I'll do it. *If 'tis only by marrying you that Daniel's name can be cleared, then I'll marry you, Titus Sim.*"

He fell on his knees and made wild, incoherent sounds. He seized her hands and covered them with kisses. He uttered inarticulate cries and praised God. She endured it with difficulty, and continually implored him to depart from her. At last he rose, restrained himself, and spoke more calmly.

"Why did you make me say those cruel things? Why did you rouse the devil in me like that? Right well you know I never meant them. 'Twas only the very madness of dis-

appointed love made me think of such vile things. Forget them, Minnie! Forget them and forgive them. I only want your happiness. Marry me and leave the rest to me. You'll never be sorry. I've got love enough for both of us. Wait and see. You'll turn to me yet, and trust me, and be sorry for me. Then, please God, you'll come to love me a little."

"Go, now," she said. "You've got my answer."

"And sweeter words never fell on a sad man's ear, my blessed wife to be! We'll wait till the dead is buried. We promised him to say nothing until then. And afterwards all people shall know that your Daniel was innocent."

He left her and she locked the cottage door behind him. After that Minnie fell shivering upon a seat beside the fire, and buried her face in her hands. She did not fear for herself; she was only frightened at the strange power within her that had from the first taught her to read this man aright. A secret voice had always spoken the truth to her heart concerning him, and now in her sight he stood very knave from head to heel. Even his faithful love was to her a loathsome circumstance.

She saw in Titus Sim the unknown accomplice of the dead drunkard. Their united cunning

had planned the subtle and skilful raids at Middlecott; again and again they had robbed the plantations: again and again Sim, unsuspected, had slipped from the Court by night and joined Parkinson at his work. But to Sim alone, his evil genius quickened by love, had belonged the sequel to the tragedy in Middlecott Lower Hundred. After Thorpe fell, he had hastened to the empty house on the Moor, well knowing that it would be empty. The gun he had taken and the gun he had hidden where he might find it on the first light of day. And now he had left her to choose between Daniel's honour and himself, or neither. One depended upon the other. Her momentary refusal had lifted the curtain from him, and showed her in a lightning flash the real man. Life was nothing to him. He had already driven her husband to death, and if she refused him, she guessed that another swift tragedy would follow upon the refusal. She thought long and deeply how best to plan the future. But Titus Sim entered very little into her calculations.

While still she sat in thought, there came a knock at the door, and Jane Beer asked to be admitted. Her husband followed her, and while Mrs Beer kissed Minnie, the publican shook her hand with all his might.

"'Tis closing time," he said. "But, though we could close the bar, me an' Jane couldn't close our own eyes till we'd comed over and wished you joy—first a girl and then a boy—according to the old saying. Sim tells us you've consented at last, so soon all sorrow will be past, an' if I don't tip you a fine rhyme 'pon your wedding day, 'tis pity."

The woman smiled and thanked them.

"And Johnny have brought over a drink," said Jane Beer. "'Tis some sparkling wine—one bottle of twelve as we've had ever since we opened house. An' only one bottle sold all these years. Champagne, according to the label."

Mr Beer drew forth the liquor.

"Now you shall taste stuff as'll make you feel as though you'd got wings," he told her, "and if you haven't got no wine-glasses, cups will do just as well."

But Minnie put her hand on his and prevented him from cutting the wires.

"Stop; this is all wrong; you are mistaken, you kind hearts," she said. "Mr Sim didn't tell you all—or nearly all. I cannot marry him; and if there was but one man left on earth and 'twas he, I'd not marry him. 'Twas this I said to him; that if the only way to clear my Daniel's name was by taking him for a husband, then I'd do it."

"He says that you promised?"

"Only that, Mr Beer. And how if my Daniel's name don't lie at the mercy of Titus Sim? I can't tell you about it yet. Presently I will."

Johnny Beer patted the bottle.

"Then we'll keep this high-spirited liquor till we all know where we are," he said. "Never shout when you're in doubt. But we'll shout an' see the stuff foam another day. Come on home, Jane. And I do hope still, my dear, you'll let that poor, white-faced wretch find his way into your heart. For it all points to him; and you can't bide here wasting your womanhood in the midst of the desert for ever. You might so well go in a convent of holy women—a very frosty picture, I'm sure."

"My!" said Mrs Beer. "If she haven't stuck her letter 'pon the mantel-shelf an' never read a line of it! Now, to me, a letter's like a thorn in my finger till 'tis open and mastered."

Minnie handed the note to her friend. She had felt a faint flutter on seeing it, and thought that by blessed chance Dan might have written to her again before the end of his life. But the postmark was 'Moretonhampstead'; the writing she did not know.

"I've no secrets," said Minnie. "Read it out, Jane. If there's anything good in it for

me, 'twill be as much a joy to you as to me."

"Give it here," commanded Johnny. "In the matter of reading a letter, I may be said to know what's what. I'll read it aloud, since you've got no secrets, my dear, and if there's a pennyworth of good in it—enough for the excuse, I'll open the champagne after all. We'm on the loose to-night seemingly."

A moment later and the letter was perused. Whereupon Mr Beer found himself faced with material for a whole volume of new poems. He was also called upon to open his bottle of champagne in a hurry ; for there was no other stimulant in the house, and very soon necessity for such a thing arose.

Henry Vivian wrote carefully and came to the tremendous truth as gently as possible ; but it had to be told, and when she heard it—when the mighty fact fell upon her ear that Daniel was not dead, but alive and well and close at hand, ready to visit her on the dawn of the morrow—Minnie fainted ; and Jane Beer very nearly did the same. Happily, the poet and publican kept his head. His own lady he summoned to resolution by the force of his uplifted voice. Then he loosed the champagne cork, which happily flew without hesitation, and soon had wine at the girl's white lips.

It was long before she could listen to the end of the letter. Then the writer warned her that Daniel found it beyond human power to keep longer from her side, and that on the following morning, if a black man came thundering at the door of Hangman's Hut, she must on no account refuse him admission.

"God's light!" cried Mr Beer. "'Tis after midnight now. I lay the man will be dressing hisself to come to his wife within an hour or two! To think—to think that underneath that skin so black Dan Sweetland to his home came back! But 'tis a dead secret. Me an' my missus didn't ought to know it."

"'Tis safe enough with us, I'm sure," said Mrs Beer, rather indignantly.

"Trust us for that. And now we'll drain the flowing bowl to that brave hero. 'Black but comely.' And I wonder if he's black all over? Ban't likely, I should think. I hope not, for your sake, my dear. Drink again—drink to the bottom! 'Tis for him. And don't you go for to meet him in that dress. There's enough black 'pon Dan without you being black too."

"That's good advice—just like Johnny's sense. Don't you appear afore him like a widow woman," said Mrs Beer. "'Twould be awful bad luck. You just put on your pretty print wi' the lilac pattern. And, after breakfast,

I'll step over in my dandy-go-risset gown—out of respect. I must see the young youth afore he washes. 'Twill be a great adventure, I'm sure."

She prattled on to distract Minnie's mind from the force of this shock. The girl hardly spoke, but sat with her hand in Mrs Beer's. Sometimes she sighed, and at last merciful tears came to her eyes and she wept.

"Now you come along of us," said Johnny. "I ban't going to let you bide here by yourself. You come back an' have a good sleep with Jane, and I'll call you at peep o' day. Then you can rise up and step home, an' light the fire an' make all ready for his breakfast. 'Obi' be his name now, remember! And, if you'll believe it, when first he stalked amongst us to the White Hart, as black an' silent as a shadow in a coat, if his father didn't half see through him! Yes, he did. He up an' stared an' said, 'Why, that niggard do travel exactly like my son Dan!' Well—the bottle's empty. It did its duty better than many a living man have done. I feel it within me like a cheerful companion, and I hope 'tis the same with you, iadies. Now, let's be going."

But Minnie would not accompany them. She was firm, and presently regained her self-possession.

"I've bided here ever since the day I married him," she said. "I won't go now. God sent you both to me this night, for it might have gone hard with me if I'd took this wonnerful shower of blessings all alone; but your gentle hands was ready, Jane; an' you, Mr Beer—"

"An' the bottle, my dear."

"Yes, yes. Come back to me to-morrow."

"So us will then—to think of you having your breakfast with a black man! Poor Titus! He'll be so white as t'other be dark. God's a marvel! Come on, Jane. Leave her alone. She'd rather. But I lay my wife will be peeping through the blind to see him come to-morrow! Trust a woman to do that. Good night, bless your brave heart! 'Tis a glorious reward for all the grief you've suffered."

Mrs Beer kissed Minnie and hugged her, and Mr Beer so far forgot himself as to do the same.

"'Twas the champagne," he confessed afterwards. "I got above myself with the news. My poetic disposition, Jane. If it had been the Queen of England I should have done the like. To think of the verses to be made out of such a come-along-o't!"

"I know," answered Mrs Beer. "But what about Adam Thorpe? Of course he didn't do it, but the world still thinks he did; and for

my part I don't see anything to make verses about while the rope be still waiting for the poor fellow. Black or white, 'tis all one."

"But he's safe, you see! Nobody but us and Mr Vivian and Minnie will know the secret. And you may bet your life Providence didn't save him to hang him. The Lord's on his side, whatever betide."

"That's comforting, if true," answered Mrs Beer. "An' no doubt it is true," she added. "When did man or woman find you wrong?"

They retired and talked on, full of this great matter, until dawn touched their white window-blind, and Johnny slept.

A moment later sounds of a galloping horse broke the tremendous silence of the Moor, and Jane Beer leapt from her bed and ran to the window.

A rider passed swiftly in the dull beginning of light. Beyond the inn he turned from the highway and proceeded in the direction of Hangman's Hut.

"He wasn't the black man—that I'm sure!" she exclaimed; but her husband did not hear, and his only answer was a snore.

Mrs Beer crept back to his side.

"White as a dog's tooth his face was!" she said to herself. "Even in the cock-light I could see that."

She reflected uneasily. Then an explanation came.

“Why, the chap washed hisself, to be sure! No doubt the black comes off, like the Christy’s Minstrels us seed to Exeter. He wouldn’t go to see his wife like a black gorilla.”

This solution of the difficulty seemed satisfactory to Mrs Beer. “The good Lord bless ’em!” she said.

Then she also prepared to sleep; but a hideous din in her ear awoke her. A bellowing as of a thousand bulls came up from the road. It woke Mr Beer, as it was meant to do, and with his wife he hastened to peep into the dawn. Jane then told her husband what she had already seen, and this, combined with the spectacle now before them, roused both effectually. In another moment the publican was pulling on his clothes.

CHAPTER XIX

MR SIM TELLS THE TRUTH

TITUS SIM returned home with the spirit of a conqueror. The long struggle was over and the battle won. Minnie Sweetland had promised to marry him, if only by so doing her late husband could be proved innocent; and he well knew there was no alternative. She would keep her word: that he also knew.

At supper in the servants' hall of Middlecott Court, Titus, who arrived as the others were finishing their meal, showed such evident lightness of heart that Mr Hockaday, the butler, inquired the cause. Sim ate and spoke together. He announced his approaching marriage with the widow of Daniel Sweetland; and Dan, who sat smoking his pipe in a corner of the kitchen by the fire, heard his friend's news and witnessed his joy.

"At last!" said Mr Hockaday. "Well, she have taken her time, no doubt; but you can't wonder at that. It had to be; an' she was worth waiting for. So there'll be more changes, and you'll leave Middlecott, no doubt? When's the nupshalls?"

"I don't know. That's for her to say. Soon, I hope. I can't believe it, Hockaday ; 'tis almost too good to be true. My cup's full."

Dan Sweetland's pipe went out, and he rose, knocked the ashes from it, and retired to his room. It was in the servants' quarters, and he always took good care to lock the door. None of the domestics had ever seen the inside of the chamber since Dan became occupant. Had they done so, it must have much surprised them to find a little photograph of Minnie Sweetland upon the mantelpiece.

To this secluded den "Obi" now departed, and his thoughts were a strange mixture of grave and gay. He was to see his wife in the morning, for that day had gone the letter from Henry Vivian. But Minnie could not yet have read the great news, since it seemed that within the hour she had engaged herself to Titus Sim. The fact struck with petrifying force upon Daniel's mind. It woke a wide uneasiness and a great sorrow for the awful disappointment that must await his friend. Minnie's own attitude puzzled him deeply. Could it be true that she had accepted Sim? Could it be possible that his return to life would not please her? This thought came and went like a flash of lightning. It left in his mind shame and wonder that it could have

come. Even at that moment he felt joy. She knew now ; the letter must have reached her from Warren Inn after Sim had gone. She would be waiting for him in the dawn light ; she would open her arms for him before another sun had risen. Only hours remained between their meeting ; but Dan felt that those hours must be occupied with Titus Sim. To hide his secret from Titus was no longer possible. Often and often he had blamed himself for doing so. Sim's love for Minnie had long been general knowledge and a frequent theme of conversation among men and maidens at Middlecott Court. Not seldom had Daniel risen and taken himself beyond earshot. One thing he remembered : that Sim had never in his hearing spoken an unkind word of him, or an improper one concerning his wife. Now, upon this night, Sim's joy hurt and stabbed the man with the black face. To see Titus thus glad at the possibility of bliss impossible, was a tragic spectacle for Sweetland. He thought deeply, then resolved with himself that, despite the terrific shock of it, he would break the truth to Sim. To delay was the greater cruelty. He had, indeed, desired from the moment of his landing to let Titus into the great secret ; but Henry Vivian refused to allow him to do so.

It was past midnight when Daniel, acting upon this new impulse, dressed himself and went to the room near his own in which Titus slept. A light was burning and Mr Sim, who had not retired, turned from the writing of a letter to see the black man standing in the door.

"Hullo, Obi! What ever do you want?" he asked; then made the sign of a question.

But Daniel answered and Sim fell back speechless upon his bed to hear the long silent tones.

"What nightmare's this? You can speak—speak in that voice? What are you then?"

"One as be your friend always—always—one as can't live this lie no more—not for you, Titus. It have hurt me to the soul doing it; it have tormented me day by day to see your honest face and hear your honest speech. But you must forgive me for coming to life, old pal. 'Twas time an' more than time I did so seemingly. After to-night I couldn't hide myself behind this black face and this blank silence no more—not from you. Say you forgive me, Titus. 'Twas life or death, remember."

"Your life is my death," answered the other, slowly. "Do you understand that?"

Sim had turned deathly white, and perspiration made his face shine like ivory.

“Don’t say such things. You’re a free, honest man as no living soul can say one word against,” replied Daniel. “Your record be clean, an’ you can stand up in the face of the nation, and no man can cast a word at you. Don’t talk of death. ’Tis true I’ve got her—Minnie—my own wife; but that’s all I have got in the world; an’ God only knows if I shall ever be able to call her mine afore the people. Don’t grudge me my sole, blessed joy. Think what I be, Titus—an outcast, a wanderer, a man that have had to black his face an’ shut his mouth to escape the gallows. Don’t—but why should I say these things to you? Right well I know the steel you be forged of. Right well I know you never change. You’m my side still, Titus? Say you’m my side still. Say you’ve forgiven me. ’Twas my neck I was playing for—I never thought to break your heart by this trick. An’ you must forgive Minnie, too. ’Twas only yesterday morn that Mr Henry’s letter went to her. He wouldn’t let me see her before, and he wrote to break it to her that I was alive an’ not far off. Of course, not knowing that, she said ‘Yes’ to you. To-morrow—to-day, I should say—at first glimmer of light, he’ve given me leave to go up along an’ hear what she’ve got to tell me. Shake my hand—I ban’t black

except my face. My heart's white an' well you know it, Titus."

He offered his hand and the other took it mechanically.

"You've knocked me all of a heap," he said. "Let me hear your tale. 'Twill give my heart time to still an' beat level again. You at my elbow! And she—this very night—promised to marry me. 'Tis more than a man's brain can hold."

"Afore she knowed that I was back in life again."

Sim desired to think. The crash of this news confused him and unsettled his mind.

"Tell your tale from the beginning, Daniel," he said. "Let me hear it all: then I'll tell you mine, and give you some idea of what I've been doing while you was away."

"You haven't cleared up the job in Middlecott Lower Hundred?"

"Speak your speech," repeated Sim. "What I've got to say I'll say afterwards."

Thereupon Daniel told his long story from the beginning. He described his escape, his visit to Minnie, his journey to Plymouth, his experiences in the *Peabody*. He told of life in the West Indies, of his meeting with Henry Vivian and the tragedy of Jesse Hagan and

Jabez Ford. He finally explained the reasons for his present disguise, and his hopes how, during the next few months, that might happen which would clear his name and prove him an innocent and injured man.

To this recital, which occupied above an hour, Sim appeared to pay full heed, but in reality his thoughts were far away. He nodded from time to time, uttered an ejaculation or expression of wonder or regret, and suggested that he was devoting his whole mind to his friend's sensational story, but in truth the man's thought was otherwise engaged. Desperation and malice and hate were the furies that now drove him forward. While he lent his ear to Daniel, his brains were full of seething wrath, and he plotted how best to use that night, how best to ruin for ever this being who had returned thus inopportunately from the grave. He shook in secret, his rage nearly choked him unseen; and at last caution was thrown to the winds, craft was forgotten, passion whirled Sim out of himself, he played his part no more, and as Daniel to his friend had proclaimed the living truth behind the black veil that hid it, so now Titus also revealed himself, spoke in a frenzy of disappointed passion, and stripped his heart to the other's horrified gaze. Even in the full tempest and springtime of his fury, Sim

perceived that he held the upper hand, and made that clear to Sweetland. The truth, indeed, he told, but without a witness, and it was beyond the listener's power to prove anything. He might repeat Sim's infamous confession, but there were none to substantiate the story. Only one man could have done so, and he lay waiting for his funeral on the morrow.

"I've heard you, now hear me," said the footman. "The Devil's kept you for the rope, Dan Sweetland; and 'twas I wove the rope and shall live to know you've worn it. Your friend once, your bitter enemy to the death from the day that woman put you before me and chose you for her husband. After that I cursed your shadow when you passed and only waited the right moment to get you out of my road for evermore. In the nick of time the chance fell, and I—that you trusted as a pig trusts the butcher—I caught you like a rabbit in a snare. Glare at me! Stare your damned black eyes out of your head! I did it—did it all! And I've not done with you yet—remember that. Rix Parkinson's a dead man now—gone to have it out in hell with Adam Thorpe. 'Twas Rix that shot him, and 'twas I that thrashed your father the same night. We worked very well together—Rix and me. Look out of the window. Only a six-foot drop—you'll have the same drop

presently—with a rope round your neck. Down that wall I've gone a hundred times. Rix drank damnation with his money; I put my share away and let it grow. You was the black sheep in everybody's mouth. I—that was twice and twenty times the skilled sportsman you was—I went my way quiet and unsuspected. Many and many and many's the night me and Parkinson thinned the pheasants. Then came that hour when your old fool of a father and Adam Thorpe blundered on us. The best men will make a mistake now and again; yet after all's said, the mistake was theirs, for one lost his life and t'other got his grey head broken. And then 'twas, after we'd gathered our birds again and gone, that the thought of what might be came to me. 'Sweetland's the man for this dirty work,' says the Devil to me; and in an hour, when Rix was away with the birds, I went up over to your new home and found you at hand. You almost walked on top of me as you went away; then I slipped into the hovel by unlatching a back window with a bit of wire, and there was your gun waiting for me, with cartridges in it as had just been fired! I saw you hanging in Exeter gaol from that moment, if Thorpe died. The rest you know. I hid the gun that night afore the hue and cry, and, come morning, found it put away very carefully

where 'twas supposed you meant to come for it some other day. Meantime Thorpe died in hospital. 'Twas all as easy as lying. And now you stand where you stood the hour that you were arrested. You're a doomed man, for only I can prove your innocence, and that I never will. That's what it is to come between a man and a woman he loves. If I don't have her, nobody shall have her—least of all you."

The other rose and gasped in amazement at this narrative.

"Be it Sim I hear, or some cold-blooded Dowl as have got into his shape?"

"You know well enough, ruin seize you! Wrecked my life—that's what you've done; but the last word's mine. I haven't worked and toiled by night and day for this. I'll have her yet. Why not? You're dead already! Go—get out of my sight—sleep your last easy sleep. Go, I say, or I'll do for you with my own hand! 'Tis time you were in hell. An' there I'll follow you; but not yet—not yet. Many a long year's start of me you'll have. I must marry and get children; and if I live long enough, I'll cheat the Devil yet; but you—your thread's spun; dead and buried in quick-lime you shall be!"

Nothing could have exceeded the frantic passion with which Sim uttered this whirl of

words. They burst from him with explosions and nearly choked him. His eyes blazed, his limbs worked spasmodically. For the time he behaved like a malignant lunatic.

Sweetland perceived that little was to be gained by further speech with one insane. Therefore he rose and went away, that Titus might have time to reflect and recover his senses. How much of this confession to believe, Daniel did not know. At first, though dazed by such dreadful tidings, he had credited the story and set it down to love run mad; but when real madness blazed on Sim's white face and he ceased to be coherent—when the baffled rascal, in his storm and hurricane of disappointment, raved of death and hell, Dan began to suppose him insane in earnest. The wish was father to the thought. Even in his bewilderment and consternation at this result of his confession to his friend, there came sorrow for Titus Sim, and grief that such an awful catastrophe had overtaken him. He longed to believe the whole dreadful story was spun of moonshine; but he could not. There was too much method in it. Sim had been responsible for all, and still too clearly desired his destruction.

For a few moments Sweetland stood irresolute at the door of the footman's room. Then he crept back to his own. No sign of day had

yet dawned. As he stood in profound thought, a clock below struck two.

At last the determination to see his master overcame Daniel. The gravity of his position was such that he did not hesitate. In a few moments he knocked at Henry Vivian's door and was admitted.

The young man had now reached convalescence, but still kept his room. A fire was burning, and Vivian rose and lighted a lamp.

"Come in," he said. "I cannot sleep. I suppose you can't either, Dan. Well, an hour or two more and you're in her arms! Be cautious and get back before the house is stirring. Put that soup on the fire and give me a cigarette. I wish you could take your wife some good news; but we hope the good news may come from her. You know what my father's opinion is. He believes in you stoutly and will not raise a finger against you. But of course he thinks I left you in Tobago."

Dan waited for his master to finish speaking, and then told him what had happened. Sweetland was so impressed with this new peril now sprung upon him, that he had not thought how the story of Sim would strike another listener. But Vivian's attitude was naturally of a sort to relieve the innocent man not a little.

"Of all the infernal scoundrels I ever heard,

this knave is the worst!" he cried. "But there's no time to waste. We must strike instantly, or it may be too late. Even now precious time has been wasted. Confound my weakness! I can't help you. Will you wake John, or Hockaday, or are you equal to tackling him single-handed?"

"Tackling Sim? Of course I can do it, sir. Come to think of it, he ought to be thrashed for thrashing my old father. But what good will a thrashing do?"

"None. I don't mean that. Only he must be made fast before he can take any steps against you. I must see him. Go! Go! It was madness to leave him. Bring him to me, and if he refuses to come, shout and rouse the house."

Sweetland started instantly, but his master called him back.

"Take this pistol," he said. "This man's a thousand times more dangerous than you dream of. Either mad or sane, it would be better for you to be in a cage with a tiger than with him. If he touches you, fire on him—and fire first. If he obeys you, bring him here, and let him walk in front of you. Be quick!"

Dan took the weapon and hurried back to Sim's room, but it was empty. For a moment he stood staring round it, and, in that silence,

he heard a horse gallop out of the stable yard not far distant. Henry Vivian's fears were confirmed, and Titus had made first move in the grim game now to be played.

Dan rushed back with his news.

"You were right, sir; he's gone—just galloped out of the yard. He's off to the police station!"

"Not he," answered the other. "Run for your life—or her life—your wife, Dan! That's where he's gone, and that's where you'll find him. Fly—take my horse; but I'm afraid he has; and, if so, you'll never catch him. Nothing we've got will overtake my gelding."

But his last words were spoken to air, for Dan, albeit he had been slow to rouse, was indeed alive at last. In two minutes he had left the house. There was no difficulty, for the doors stood open as Sim had left them. But Vivian's fast hack was not in the stable, and nothing else there, under Dan's heavy weight, stood the smallest chance of catching it.

The first tremor of dawn was in the sky, and its ghastly ray touched a circle of plate glass. The glass belonged to the great front lamp of Henry Vivian's new motor car, and it stood there, the incarnation of sleeping strength and speed. There was no time to ask leave or return to the house, but Daniel knew his

master's only regret would be that he could not accompany him. He understood the great machine well, and had already driven it on several occasions. It was of forty horse-power and easily able to breast the steep acclivities that stretched between Middlecott Court and the Moor; but the road was dangerous and a good horse had power to proceed more swiftly over half of the ground than any vehicle on wheels. Once in the Moor, however, it might be possible to make up lost ground. For four or five miles Daniel calculated that he could drive the car many times as fast as a horse could gallop. Thus he might get even with Sim at the finish.

As quickly as possible he lighted the lamp, set the motor in motion, and went upon his way. As he departed he hooted loudly, that Henry Vivian might know the thing he had done.

CHAPTER XX

FIVE MILES IN FIVE MINUTES

DAWN fought with night and slowly conquered as Dan in the great motor panted upwards from Middlecott to the high lands above. His way led through dense woods, and the blaze of the lamp threw a cone of light far ahead, while the wheels beneath him turned silently and swiftly over a carpet of pine needles under the darkness, or jolted over the tree roots that spread in ridges across the way. To the east a cold pallor stole between the regiments of trunks, but as yet no bird called or diurnal beast moved from its holt. In the earth as he drove along, Dan could mark the fresh imprint of hoofs upon the ground, stamped darkly there. The gate at the end of the wood hung open as the horseman had left it, and Sweetland perceived that his master was in the right. Now, chafed by the sweet cold air, his black face burned and his blood leapt at his heart. But anger it was that heated him. The trust and friendship and honest love of a lifetime were turned in these terrible moments to hatred. As he leapt forward and altered his gear for

climbing a steep and tortuous hill, his mind's gear likewise changed. From his soul he shut off love and pity for ever; he forgot all this knave had suffered, but only remembered his own sufferings and accumulated misfortunes. Sim had hoped, and still hoped, to hang him; Sim had seized the chance offered by the Devil to tear him from his young wife's side upon their wedding day; Sim had plotted and planned with a spider's patience and craft to fill his shoes; and even now what fiend's errand might he be upon? But the luxury of rage was not for this moment. Once Dan's hand shook and in a second he came near wrecking the motor between lofty hedge-banks. He saved it by six inches and turned cold at the danger averted. Her life might depend upon his skill and coolness now. The car grunted slowly up a stiff hill of rough and broken surface. Here a horse's progress must be infinitely swifter than his own. His heart sank at the necessary tardiness of progress; but his anger died, and, when it was possible to increase speed, the man had mastered himself and drove with utmost skill and judgment.

Light began to gather in the sky, and Dan was glad, for in five minutes more he would be upon the waste land and must make his effort. From the Moor gate to Johnny Beer's public-

house was five miles, and Sweetland calculated that if he could accomplish that distance in as many minutes, he and Sim ought to arrive at the inn together. But two long and stiff hills occurred upon the road. These must slow him down considerably and, to make up for the lost time, it would be necessary to take declivities and level ground at the greatest pace his car could travel. He thoroughly estimated the tremendous risks he ran and the fatal issue of any mistake. He was only thankful that, for good or ill, the ordeal must be over in minutes. Either he would perish with a broken neck, or he would save his wife from possible destruction. It was now light enough to see the road ahead. The Moor gate, blown by the wind, also hung open; he rushed forward without slackening of speed.

Sim, it seemed, had not counted upon such swift pursuit. By shutting the gates behind him, he had much improved his own chances, but all stood ajar save one, and Sweetland's hope was so much the higher. Now out on the high Moor, no further obstacles could be met with. The surface was good, the road wide, and it was unlikely that any vehicle would share the way with him or be passed, either going or approaching. Ponies or sheep might, indeed, interrupt him, but he trusted to his

hooter to frighten them away before he reached them.

Dan set the powerful machine at work in earnest, and he felt it gather itself together beneath him, like a living thing, hum like a hive of bees, and leap forward with accelerated speed. The road, glimmering in dawn light, seemed a shining white ribbon that was wound up by the car as it flew onwards. There came a sensation that he sat upon a huge, busy, but motionless monster that was swallowing the track. The roadway poured under his wheels like a river; the Moor to right and left wound away like mighty wheels whose axes were on the horizon.

Though Dan drove the five miles in rather less than five minutes, the time to him seemed very long. Twice he was in peril, and twice escaped death by a shade. At a steep hill, where it became absolutely necessary to slow down, he put on pace again too soon while yet fifty yards of the declivity remained to be run. But the car responded quicker than he expected, and on a little bridge, which spanned the bottom of the coomb and crossed a stream, his right fore-wheel actually touched the parapet and the hub of the wheel struck a splinter from the granite, which shot upward like a bullet and tore Dan's elbow to the bone.

Then came the last straight mile—a long and level tract upon whose left stood Bennett's Cross, while to the right lay Furnum Regis, the Oven of the King. Now a final rush began, and straining his watering eyes to look ahead and see if by chance Titus Sim might be in sight, Dan saw, three hundred yards in front of him, a sheep standing upon the middle of the road with its back towards the car. He was now running more than eighty miles an hour, and only seconds separated him from the creature. He sounded his hooter, but the sheep did not move, and Dan had barely time to grip the iron rail in front of him when there came the crash of impact. The car was now skimming the ground rather than running upon it; thus the full weight of the motor struck the wether. It was hurled ten yards forward and fell in a crushed heap of wool and bones. The impact carried away the motor-lamp, which dropped to the right, and the car had passed between lamp and sheep and was a hundred yards beyond them before Dan drew his breath. A bolt had given at one end of the bar he held, and a moment later it became detached in his hand.

Half a minute more and the Warren Inn came into sight, while, at the same moment, Daniel saw a horse galloping hard three

hundred yards ahead of him. Compared with the speed of the car, it appeared to be standing still ; but just as he found himself beside it, the Warren Inn rose on his right, and Sweetland was forced to slow down that he might stop. As he did so he sounded the hooter with all his might to waken Beer. Sim, on the horse, had become aware of a motor's approach long before it reached him, and, guessing that Dan was following, he had pushed his horse too fast. He knew it was failing ; but he also knew that Sweetland must slow down before he could alight, and the sequel proved him correct, for Daniel had already overshot the turning to Hangman's Hut by two hundred yards before he could pull up. By rather more than two hundred yards, therefore, Sim had a start upon the half-mile of rough ground that separated the high road from Minnie's home. Sim was also mounted, but herein lay no advantage, for his steed, cruelly over-ridden, now came down with a crash and threw the rider over his head. Titus turned a clean somersault and fell in a peat mire on his back unhurt. Dripping with black mud from head to heel, but none the worse, he rushed on, and as Daniel breasted the last hillock, he saw Titus knock at the door of Hangman's Hut and Minnie throw it wide.

Sim's fall had lost him ground, and he was not a hundred yards ahead of his enemy when he entered the cottage.

Wild monsters both the men looked now, but Sweetland's guise was the strangest. His shirt had blown open, his hat was off. A breast ivory white supported his ink-black neck and face. A sleeve had been torn away as he leapt out of the car, and from a white arm extended a black hand dripping blood. The blow at the bridge he had not felt, but the man's arm was deeply wounded and now gore freely dripped from the injury. In his hand he carried the front bar of the motor-car, which had come off. Henry Vivian's pistol was still in his pocket, but he had forgotten it.

The way now led downhill, and little more than ten seconds had elapsed before Daniel reached the door of his home. It was shut, but he threw himself against it and the latch broke. Then he stood in the kitchen of the cottage and saw Sim with Minnie on her knees at his feet. Titus was bending over her, and he had one hand on her hair dragging back her head. The other hand held a jack-knife to his mouth, and he opened this weapon with his teeth as Sweetland sprang in upon him. Sim's hand went back for the blow, but it was not delivered. Instead, his arm was pinned to his

side and he found himself wrestling with a demon.

Both men were powerful, but both were spent. Sweetland had lost much blood from his elbow, and he found himself growing weak. Titus had fared better, though he too blew hard after a half-mile run.

He had come to kill Minnie Sweetland; now he exulted and worked to tire out the other. The knife had fallen out of his hand, but as Minnie rushed to reach it from him, Sim put his foot upon it.

"So much the better!" he cried, going down easily as Daniel threw him. "Do what you like—go on—you're bleeding to death! But Death's self sha'n't cheat me of you. Your death's my—"

He spoke no more, for Sweetland was now quite aware that only moments separated him from falling. He was growing weak fast, and his head swam. He knew that he must strike, and strike with every atom of strength that remained to him, or he would drop unconscious and leave his wife to her fate. For a moment he relaxed his hold, and as he did so Sim's arm shot out and he grasped his knife. Then a strange thing happened, for the watching woman, who had disregarded Daniel's order to fly and escape, flung herself straight be-

tween the men ; and it seemed that it was not to shield her husband, but the would-be murderer, that she came. Daniel had only loosed his grip to regain his iron bar. This he did and, in using it, he was quicker than Sim. Even as the footman regained his knife, the other, now on his knees, raised the heavy and shining metal rod over his shoulder and, with both hands and all his remaining strength, brought it down upon Sim's head. Then between that certain death and the man's skull Minnie lifted her slight arm and broke the blow. Like a carrot the bone cracked, but force enough still remained in Daniel's stroke to stretch out his enemy senseless.

"God's life! Why for did you do that?" cried Dan. "Oh—your little arm—Minnie—Minnie!"

"'Tis only broke," she said. "That's naught. I saw you were going to kill him. 'Twould have wasted all my work for 'e, husband, an' spoilt all the time to come. You be free afore the world, an' innocent afore the world. I can prove it, Dan. I can prove it!"

For answer his head rolled back and he fell forward from his knees to the ground. She stood above the two unconscious men, herself tottering and powerless to help either.

Then it was that Beer, in the lightest of

attire, and followed by his wife, rushed upon the scene. Mrs Sweetland bade him first tend her husband, and Johnny soon propped Dan's head and tied up the bleeding arm above the elbow. After that Dan recovered consciousness and called to his wife.

"Give me something to drink—spirits. I shall be all right in an hour. You was right, Min. 'Twould have been a poor home-coming to kill this devil. But your arm—that awful sound."

"You go," said Johnny to his wife. "Get a bottle of brandy and nip back as quick as lightning. And call the boy at the same time an' tell him to saddle the pony an' ride like hell for Dr Budd. This chap's dead, I'm thinking."

He spoke of Sim, who had not recovered consciousness.

"What May games be these, Dan Sweetland?" asked Mr Beer. Dan, however, had no leisure for Johnny. He lay quite still and fought to keep consciousness.

"Us can't wait for Sim," he said; "Minnie's more than this here man. After I've took in a tumbler of spirits, I'll stand up again and get to the car. Then I'll drive her straight to the cottage hospital and come back for Sim. He's not dead. 'Twas that li'l broken arm there saved him."

"A masterpiece you be, sure enough! Black, an' blue, an' bloody; an' yet the real old Dan Sweetland, an' no other! Let me see your elbow again. Yes, it have done bleeding now."

"Don't trouble about me," said Dan. "Listen to his chest an' see if you can hear his heart beating. Ban't no odds if I've killed him; for if I hadn't done it, he'd have killed me an' my wife too. A near shave, by God! He had her by the hair an' thicky pig-sticking knife between his teeth."

"However comed you to let him in after last night, my dear?" asked Johnny.

"I was on the watch," she answered. "I seed a man with a black face running through the dawnlight, an' I didn't stop to think, but rushed to the door an' flinged it open for him. He was on me like a tiger, an' I thought 'twas all over when my husband leapt at him."

"A brave day's doings," said Mr Beer. "Matter for a book of verses, if you only get well again, Daniel."

As he spoke he put his ear to the breast of Titus Sim, and the others waited in silence.

"There's something going on," pronounced the publican. "The works be moving—no doubt 'tis the organ of his heart. But it don't

sound too merry by no means. However, where there's life there's hope; and where there's death there's hope in another world. Though 'twill take the Almighty all His time to get this chap saved. Cut off with murder in his heart!"

Mrs Beer returned. She had run all the way, and could not speak for a time. Daniel drank the spirits like a sailor; then Minnie was made to take a little, but not until it had been attempted to get some down the throat of Sim. This, however, proved impossible.

"I'd take him with us in the car," said Sweetland, "but 'twill be all I can do to get to it myself. The doctor may look after him. Now, if you give me an arm, Johnny, I'll make shift to walk to the road."

Mrs Beer remained by the senseless footman, and her husband supported Daniel to the motor. Minnie followed them. She was suffering great agony, but made no sound. Once, midway between the cottage and the road, Daniel sat down to rest and drank more brandy; then he reached the motor and mounted it. Minnie climbed by his side, and the car was turned slowly round. Dan now felt better, and refused Johnny Beer's offer to accompany him.

"I be right now," he answered. "You go back to that devil in my house, an' save his filthy life, if you can."

Half way to Moreton, Daniel passed the doctor hastening on horseback to Hangman's Hut. The medical man stopped a moment, directed Minnie how to place her arm that her pain might be lessened, and then rode forward again.

The husband and wife hardly spoke upon the journey into Moretonhampstead, and it was Minnie's turn to succumb as the grey, snug shelter of the cottage hospital came before her eyes. A minute later she was carried out of the car, and within an hour her broken arm had been set, and she found herself in a comfortable bed with kind hands busy for her.

In the afternoon of that day Daniel, who had slept for six hours and taken plenty of useful nourishment, came to spend a little while with his wife. He found her light-headed, and only stopped five minutes. He felt the greatest alarm, but those in attendance on the case assured him there was no need to do so.

Next morning Minnie was better, and Daniel's visit went far to restore the even tenor of her mind and customary, patient self-control.

"They brought Sim here last night," he said. "Mr Vivian went up himself and fetched the

man down with the doctor in the motor-car. And they tell me that at midnight Sim came to his senses. He've got a concussion of the brain ; but his head-bones ban't cracked, thanks to you ; an' he's very likely to live."

CHAPTER XXI

JOHNNY BEER'S MASTERPIECE

MINNIE SWEETLAND had no time to lose, for well she understood that the police would not wait her pleasure. It behoved her, if possible, instantly to prove her husband's innocence, and, in order to do so, certain witnesses and a magistrate, before whom they could testify upon oath, were necessary. On the night of the catastrophe, before she slept, Daniel's wife was permitted to see Mrs Prowse, the widow who had attended to Rix Parkinson during his last hours ; and this woman, familiar with the truth, promised to do all that was right before the following day. Finally, the wife obtained a physician's solemn promise that the police should not take her husband until Sir Reginald Vivian was familiar with the circumstances ; then, knowing that Dan was safe, she slept. But her repose proved fitful and broken by pain. Thankfully she welcomed dawn and gladly prepared for an ordeal now hastening upon her.

At eleven o'clock a magistrate, with Sir Reginald Vivian, Henry Vivian, Mrs Prowse,

her son, Samuel Prowse, and a shorthand writer entered the room where Minnie lay. Nurses were also in attendance, and before Mrs Sweetland told her story, Daniel and the physician of the hospital appeared.

Then the wife made her statement. She spoke calmly and clearly ; there was no hesitation in her voice ; and those present were able to confirm her account in every particular.

“ When Titus Sim told me that poor Rix Parkinson was going to die and wanted to see me before he went, I was ready to visit him at once. Mr Sim said that he believed that Rix Parkinson could prove my husband innocent. It was understood also that there must be a witness of what was said. And Mr Sim was to be that witness. I have never trusted him ; so I thought it would be well if there was another witness. I told Mrs Prowse about it, and she agreed with me that it might be safer. I had already spoken to Sam Prowse here. He was always a friend to my Daniel, and I trusted him. As he lived next door to Mr Parkinson, it was easy to have him there. His mother took Samuel into the sick man's room while Mr Parkinson slept. He was hidden in a hanging cupboard, and heard every word that passed. Afterwards, when we had gone, and the sufferer was asleep again, his mother let him out.

None knew about it excepting Mrs Prowse and Samuel and me. Samuel wrote down from memory everything that Rix Parkinson said. You can compare what he wrote with what I am going to tell you. I have not seen Sam Prowse since that day, and I do not know what he wrote."

Minnie then told the story of all that the dead man had confessed, and young Prowse confirmed it. His mother also explained how she had concealed him in the room of the dying man. Minnie went on to tell of Sim's offer of marriage and his threat when she refused him. Daniel next told his story, related that he had revealed himself to Sim, and that Sim, inflamed by passion, had returned truth for truth and laid bare his own plot to destroy his old friend and marry the widow. Of this statement, however, there was no witness; but, viewed in the light of Sim's subsequent actions, it appeared in the highest degree credible. That Sim was the dead poacher's accomplice also seemed certain. Minnie mentioned the broken pipe found by her after the poaching raid at Flint Stone Quarry, and the horn button, which she had picked up in Middlecott Lower Hundred. She had kept both articles, and, after sewing on another button for him, was positive that the button found at Middlecott be-

longed to Sim's legging, by reason of its unusual pattern and notched edge. To the button Sir Reginald attached no importance, since Sim had been early upon the scene of the murder in the wood : but the pipe was serious evidence.

Titus Sim himself proved not well enough to be interrogated at this stage of affairs ; but a week later he left the hospital under arrest, and, on the same day, Sweetland also departed. The footman confessed to nothing ; but his wife's testimony proved sufficient to free Daniel and prove him innocent. A very genuine triumph therefore awaited the young man. Even Mr Corder from Plymouth wrote and congratulated him ; and in the streets the small boys crowded behind him and shouted " Hurrah ! "

His father now wearied the world with Dan's praises ; his mother spent half her time on her knees thanking God, and the other half running after her son. But, thanks to Henry Vivian and Sir Reginald, something more solid than popularity awaited Daniel. The knight, who counted little of first importance but the life and prosperity of his son and heir, amazed even Daniel's mother by his attitude towards young Sweetland.

He sent for the hero of the moment, and a

curious scene took place between them, the drift of which was hidden from Daniel until some weeks afterwards. Upon this occasion Sweetland, off whose face Jesse Hagan's dye had scarcely as yet departed, found the master of Middlecott and the village schoolmaster awaiting him. On the study table were pens, ink and paper, statements of accounts, and various more or less complicated memoranda.

"Now, Dan," said Sir Reginald, "I'm a man of few words, and hate to waste them. Therefore the meaning of this business can very well be left to take care of itself. To explain it now might be to do an unnecessary thing ; so I'll explain afterwards, if explanations are called for. This is Mr Bright, the master of the Board School. You know him already, and he tells me you were a sharp pupil and good at figures, though abominably lazy. I hope he's right for your own sake, so far as the mathemathics are concerned. During the next two hours or more Mr Bright is going to put you through your facings and see what you are good for. Do your best. Upon receiving his report, you shall hear from me. When the examination is ended, some supper will be served for you both."

Sir Reginald retired and for three hours Dan and his old schoolmaster wrestled with figures.

After midnight the young man went home to Minnie with his head spinning.

A week later the mystery was solved and Sweetland received a letter from Middlecott which much surprised him. It was an autograph communication from Sir Reginald himself.

"My gratitude, young man," he wrote, "is already familiar to you. Under Heaven you were instrumental in saving my son's life, and that alone ensures for you my active regard and interest while I myself live. The only question in my mind, since your acquittal, has been to find out how best I may advance your welfare : and at the instance of my son, whose brain is quicker than my own, I agreed to offer you a very onerous and responsible appointment—on one condition. The work requires a clear head and some knowledge of figures. Experience might also have been reasonably demanded but this I waived. You have already shown qualities of mental readiness, nerve and ability which, had they been exercised upon worthy instead of highly improper pursuits, might have excited admiration instead of suspicion. But your unruly past is forgotten and forgiven before the knowledge that you saved Henry Vivian's life. Therefore, since Mr Bright reports that your attainments, though not

splendid, are quite respectable, and that your remarkable facility for learning will soon make you master of the art of bookkeeping by double entry, I have determined to offer you the post of assistant overseer at my sugar estates in the island of Tobago. Consult with your wife whether she will entertain this proposal. The climate is healthy but exceedingly hot. My son will return to the West Indies for a short time in the autumn ; you will follow if you agree to do so ; and the nature of your duties will then be made clear to you. The necessary practical experience can only be acquired on the spot ; but I trust you to learn quickly, and I believe that the measure of your knowledge will swiftly increase to the measure of your gratitude when you receive this offer. But you must not be too much obliged. I am under an obligation to you of the mightiest description, and not the least of an old man's diminishing ambitions is to see you and your courageous and noble-minded wife happily embarked upon a worthy and a prosperous career."

"Minnie!" bawled Daniel, "listen to this here! Of course 'tis settled. To think of you seeing the world! 'Exceedingly hot,' he says. But I lay 'twon't half be so hot as 'twas last time I was there!"

"If you'd let me read your letter, dear heart, I should know a thought clearer what you was talking about, and how to advise," answered Mrs Sweetland.

There came a merry night at the "White Hart," and the bar hummed with conversation and laughter. Not a few friends were present ; not a few were missing.

"Have a drink along o' me, Matthew?" said Mr Beer. "You'll 'ax why I'm in this shop instead of behind my own counter ; but the missus is to home, an' I told her that after saying 'good-bye' to Dan and Minnie, I should make a night of it along with a few of the best. Well, they be gone after the sun. You bore yourself very stiff at the station. If he'd been my boy, I should have blubbered—such a soft fool am I. But I'm afraid your missus felt it cruel."

"She'll be all right," said Matthew Sweetland. "Think of the glory of it ! Man's work he've gone to do. An' no rough job neither. Figures ! It dries my old woman's eyes when I put it to her how uplifted he be. Hundreds of pounds will pass through his hands ! They trust him, an' well they may trust him."

"And do you trust him yet ?" croaked Gaffer Hext from his corner.

The gamekeeper laughed.

"'Tis a fair hit," he answered. "But I've owned up afore all men that I wronged Daniel, an' humbly axed my own son's pardon for doubting him. If he can forgive me, you chaps did ought to. Come to think of it, 'tis no business of yourn, when all's said."

Mr Bartley and the young man Samuel Prowse were discussing a recent trial.

"In my wide experience of evil-doers," said the policeman, "I never met his match for far-reaching cunning. Such a straight Bible face too—looked you in the eyeball like honesty's self! And all the time no better'n a nest of snakes in his heart. From a professional view, 'tis a thing to be proud of, perhaps—I mean, to have the wickedest criminal ever knowed in the west country come from among us. 'Tis a sort of fame, I suppose."

"Your business have turned your head, Bartley," declared Mr Hext. "'Tis a thing to be shamed of, not proud of—a blot upon us—that such a outrageous rip should appear here in this peaceful an' honest town."

"He wasn't Devonshire, however," explained Prowse. "The man comed from over the border, I believe."

"Somerset's welcome to him," said Sweet-

this minute by a lucky accident. If anybody would like—?”

“Nothing upon that grim subject to-night, Johnny,” said Matthew Sweetland; “but if you’ve got the stuff you turned out at the station, and if it’s merry, us’ll hear it patiently, I make no doubt.”

Mr Beer was disappointed; but the company supported Daniel’s father.

“As you like, of course; but I haven’t polished it up, you know. Many of my best verses I’ve often been knowed to write over twice. My wife will bear witness of it. But as for merry rhymes, I do think I’m better at solemn ones. There’s more sting to ’em. Mirth an’ joy an’ an extra glass to the health of a lass, an’ so on, be all very well; but they read tame unless you was on the spot yourself an’ knowed how it tasted. Nothing on God’s earth be so uninteresting reading as the account of other folks at a revel, if you wasn’t there. But with tragic matters, the creepiness be very refreshing, an’ the fact you wasn’t there adds to the pleasure. The very heart of comfortable tragedy be to look on at other people in a hell of a mess, while you’m all right, with your pint an’ your pipe drawing easy.”

“Merry verses or none, however,” declared Gaffer Hext. “What Sweetland says be

proper. Ban't a comely thing to gloat over a man when he's down. Sim have got five years—an' that's prose ; an' 'tis more than any man can do to make it poetry. So let's have what you've writ to-day of Minnie Sweetland an' Dan—that or nought."

Johnny pulled forth his rhyme.

"I'm in your hands," he said. "The polish be lacking, but the rhymes is there I believe. 'Tis pretty generally granted to me that, whatever be the quality when I pen verses, the quantity's generous and the rhymes come regular."

"Not a doubt of it, an' you'd be a famous man if you was better knowed," declared Mr Sweetland.

"For that matter, they as near as damn it printed a rhyme of mine in the *Newton Trumpet* awhile back," answered Johnny. "I heard two months afterward, from a young man as works there, that if they hadn't lost the poetry, 'twas as like as not they'd have put it in the paper."

"A near shave without a doubt," assented Prowse ; "'tis any odds but they'll print the next."

"Order for Johnny Beer!" cried Mr Bartley.

Then the poet opened his pocket-book,

smiled round about the company, and read :—

“ Let the merry bells be rung
 And the joyous songs be sung,
 While the happy and lucky pair
 For ever leave their native air.
 Yet ‘for ever’ I will not say,
 Because they may come back some day.
 See upon the platform stand
 Folks from Middlecott so grand,
 To shake the couple by the hand.
 And his mother sheds some tears
 Owing to very natural fears ;
 But when we all say ‘ Hip horray !’
 Then her tears do dry away.
 Where they soon will happy be
 ’Tis a very fine countree.
 Palms do wave and flowers do blow
 Just wherever you do go.
 Cocoanuts from there do come,
 Also sugar, also rum ;
 And the bitters that in sherry
 Often make a sad soul merry.
 So we’ll wish them a jolly long life—
 Both young Daniel and his wife.
 Also babbies, fat and hearty,
 To make up the little party.

So us’ll give ’em three cheers and one cheer more,
 And hope they’ll some day reach a Heavenly
 Shore.

“ You must understand me, neighbours, ’tis
 not worked up to concert pitch as yet ; but such
 as ’tis, there ’tis.”

Everybody shouted congratulations. Some stamped their feet ; some rapped their mugs on the bar and on the table.

"'Tis a very fine rhyme an' meets the whole case both in this world and the next. I'm sure," said Mr Sweetland, "it does you credit, Beer, an' I thank you for it."

"Specially that part about the foreign land they've gone to," declared Mr Bartley. "To hear you talk about palm-trees as if you'd walked under 'em all your life ! Be blessed if I can't *see* the place rise up in my mind like a picture."

"Sir Reginald Vivian would thank you for a copy, I reckon," continued Prowse. "He did shake hands with 'em both. He was almost the last to do it. I heard his final words to Dan. 'An' you tell my son that the sooner he's home again the better, because I can't get on at all without him.' They was his very words."

The conversation showed a tendency to drift from Johnny's verses. But he brought it back again.

"If you ax me what I like best myself," he said, "'tis the first two lines. I never wrote a better matched pair."

"So they be then. 'Tis a very great gift, Johnny, and the parish ought to be prouder of

you than 'tis," concluded Mr Sweetland. "I must ax you for that bit of writing, if you please," he added, "for my old woman's like to have a very snuffly night of it, and these here rhymes of yours will cheer up her lonely heart better than spirits."

Mr Beer handed over the paper.

"For such a high purpose, you'm welcome to 'em," he replied.

That night the sea was black and troubled. Under the obscured glimmer of a waning moon, the Royal Mail Packet *Orinoco* pushed down Channel, while a man and his wife stood upon deck with all the sounds of a great steamer in their ears. They looked upon the waters and saw white foam speeding in ghostly sheets astern and great bodies of darkness heave upwards along the bulwarks, then sink back hissing into the vague. Across the sky, flying with the low cloud-drift, gleamed brief sparks and stars that shot upward from the funnels; and below, the round windows of the engine-room flashed like great eyes upon the night. But forward was no twinkle or glimmer of light to distract the keen eyes there. The steamer was keeping double watches. A rushing and a wailing wind filled the upper air; fingers invisible played strange music on the harps of the

shrouds ; steam roared ; deep sounds rose from the engine-room ; the steering gear jolted and grated harshly. Now for a moment it was silent ; now it chattered on again, like a violent, voluble, and intermittent voice. From time to time came the clang of a bell to mark other ships ahead, to port, or starboard ; and through all sounded the throb, throb, throbbing of the ship's pulse, where her propeller thundered.

Off the Start a light-house lamp flashed friendly farewell. It shone, sank into darkness, then smiled out again across the labouring waters.

"How does my own little wife like these here strange sights and sounds?" asked the man.

"Sea an' land are all one to me," she answered, "so long as your dear arm be where it is."

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